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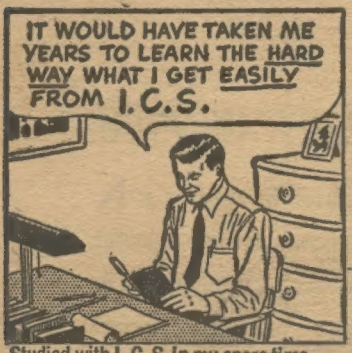

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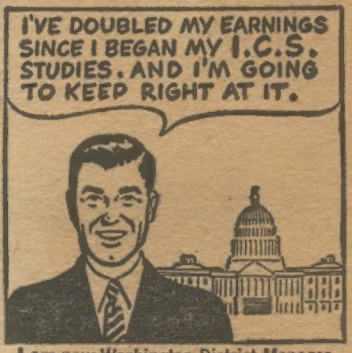

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Are all who ride this magnificent stallion doomed to meet grim violence?

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HI, WADDIES, welcome again to our trail camp, and as in the camps of the old trail herd days, visitors are always welcome and there is much conversation about ranges, cattle and horses.

We are right now in the big middle of what looks like a great rodeo season, and the contestants who are racing for the 1950 championship titles are thundering down the back stretch like race horses in the Kentucky Derby, with the outcome as much in doubt as it always is at this time of the season.

However, in the Rodeo Cowboys Association standing, Bill Linderman is leading in the all-around title race, steer wrestling and saddle bronc riding. Jim Shoulders is out in front in bull riding, Wallace Brooks is the leader in bareback bronc riding, and John Rhodes in team roping.

Don McLaughlin, the Fort Worth, Texas youngster, is burning up the circuit in calf roping and has a nice lead in this division.

In the International Rodeo Association standings, Gene Rambo is leading in the all-around, saddle bronc riding and roping. Bud Spealman is the leader in bareback bronc riding, Jim Shoulders in bull riding, and Bill Linderman in steer wrestling.

Stock Show in Texas

The recent Jasper, Texas, Fat Stock Show Rodeo was a big success. C. F. Hilton was president, Homer Todd the producer, George Elliott announcer and Jimmy Thompson arena secretary. It was a two-day show and on account of the many entries there was only one go-round in bareback bronc riding, saddle bronc riding and bull riding.

Buck Rutherford was the winner of the bareback event, Johnny Reynolds the saddle bronc riding, and Bill Williams the bull riding. Royce Sewalt won the average, or finals, in calf roping, Doyl Riley was second, Don McLaughlin was third and Jim Eskew, Jr., fourth.

Steve Heacock copped the finals of the steer wrestling, Charlie Colbert was second, Dub Phillips was third and T. B. Porter was fourth.

Doings at Douglas

The recent Douglas, Arizona, Rodeo, opened with a big western downtown parade and had a very nice two-day show, with F. W. Sharpe, Jr., as secretary, Harley Roth as stock contractor, and Mrs. Harley Roth as arena secretary.

There was only one go-round in bareback bronc riding, which was won by Slugger Sloan. The one go-round of steer wrestling was won by Gordon Davis, and the one round of bull-riding by Johnny Reynolds. The saddle bronc riding winner was Ed Taylor. There were finals in the calf roping, with Claude Henson winning the event, Ray Kilgore second, John Hoyt third and Fred Darnell, fourth.

The final winners in the team tying were: First—Lex Connelly and Marion Getzweller; second—Buck Nichols and Gilbert Nichols; third—Charles Kennon and Alvin Taylor; fourth—Vern Castro and Dan Poore.

Rodeo Casualties

Two casualties were the result of the Victorville, California, Rodeo. Kenney Madland, top hand and popular rodeo contestant of Portland, Oregon, was bucked off a bull known as Gentlemen Jim and belonging to the Andy Jauregui bucking string. Kenney hung up as he was bucked off of the bull. The bull then fell and rolled over him. Madland suffered a broken back and was taken

to the St. Bernardino Hospital, where he remained until it was deemed advisable to transfer him to another hospital in San Francisco. When the plane landed at the Edwards Air Force Base near Mojave, Kenney lapsed into unconsciousness and died a short time later.

The other casualty was the latest film cowboy star, Ben Johnson, of Oklahoma, a real all-around cowboy who first made a hit in the movie of last year, "The Mighty Joe Young," which he followed by starring in another good picture, "She Wore a Yellow Ribbon."

Ben, who is one of the fastest ropers of the country, and who broke the calf roping record at Pendleton, Oregon, last year, had just a short time before finished work on his latest picture, "Wagon Master," and had gone to the Victorville rodeo more for the sport of roping than in an effiort to win prize money. However, as he was lined up alongside of the chute ready to rope, his roping horse reared and fell over against the chute, breaking several of Ben's ribs. He was treated at the San Bernardino hospital but released and returned to Hollywood. Twelve days later, ribs all taped, he was making personal appearances with his latest picture in theatres in Oklahoma.

89'ers Celebration

With a great downtown parade of more than a thousand horses, beautiful floats and vehicles of ancient vintage, the Capitol Hill 89'ers Celebration Rodeo on Capitol Hill, Oklahoma City, Okla., got away to a good start on their recent three day show.

This rodeo, with Lee V. Sneed as president, was sponsored by the Capitol Hill Chamber of Commerce for the benefit of the charity fund of several civic clubs. Beutler Bros. were the stock contractors with Lynn Beutler as arena director, Tater Decker and Eddie Curtis as judges, Francis Fletcher and Mrs. Willard Combs as timers, and Monte Reger as arena secretary and announcer.

Specialties were presented by the Hendricks family, Jack and Bobbie Knapp, and the Boomtown Quadrille. Jack Knapp, Hoyt Hefner, and Billy Keen were the clowns.

The final results in calf roping were: first—Earl Brown; second—B. J. Pierce; third—Buddy May; fourth—Byron Wolford.

Lige Hannock won the steer wrestling, Bill Rush was second, Bill Howard was third, and

[*Turn page*]

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Dorsey Wood was fourth. Jim Shoulders copped the bareback bronc riding, Johnny Reynolds was second, Buck Rutherford was third, Bill George was fourth, Jack Buschbaum was fifth and Guy Weeks was sixth.

Gerald Roberts was best man in the saddle bronc riding, Freckles Brown was second, Bud Kessler was third, Johnny Cobb fourth, Marvin Holmes fifth and Paul Gould sixth. Bob Ferguson was tops in bull riding, Todd Whatley was second, Jim Shoulders was third, Bud Smith was fourth, Ray Roberts fifth and Freckles Brown sixth.

At the same time the Oklahoma City rodeo was taking place, or during the last two days of that rodeo, another 89'ers Celebration rodeo was taking place at the old capitol city, Guthrie, just thirty miles north of Oklahoma City, and these two being so close together gave many contestants a chance to work both shows.

Beutler Brothers also furnished the stock for the Guthrie show, which was under the management of Hump Halsey. The judges were Jackie Cooper and Milt Moe, the announcer Gene Payne, the trick riders Virginia Mea and Dixie Lee Reger, and the clown Buddy Reger.

There was only one go-round in each event, owing to the numerous entries, and this one trial was for both the day and final monies.

Dee Burk was the winner in the calf roping, B. J. Pierce was second, Bill Tatum was third, John Pogue was fourth, Wilson Savage was fifth and Lynn Franks was sixth.

Jiggs Burk copped the steer wrestling, Dub Phillips was second, Charlie Colbert was third, Carlos Green was fourth, Bill Rush fifth and Jim Whiteman sixth. Red Wilmer was best man in the bronc riding, Buck Rutherford was second, Freckles Brown was third, Gerald Roberts was fourth, Clinton Hill was fifth and Bart Clennon was sixth.

John Baker was top man in the bull riding, Bob Chartier was second, Todd Whatley was third, Charlie Beals fourth, Gene Peacock fifth, and Marvin Shoulders and Harvey Taylor split sixth.

Stymied Rodeo

Negotiations which were carried on for about three months between the officials of the Frontier Days of Cheynne, Wyoming, and the Rodeo Cowboys Association, were finally broken off with the result that the Cheyenne

rodeo was stymied for some time and could not go ahead with R. C. A. approval.

The disagreement was over the amount of prize money offered by the Frontier Days, which formerly, for the past few years, gave a certain set amount in prize money together with a percentage of the net receipts of the show added to the purses, but officials of the R. C. A. claimed that this necessitated the winning contestants to wait some time for that part of their winning that came out of the net receipts, as bills could not be totaled and profits checked in just a day or so.

The R. C. A. held out for a prize list calling for $700.00 for each event, each performance, without any percentage of the net receipts. The Frontier Days offered a prize list of $500.00 each event, each performance, and the two groups were deadlocked for a time and then negotiations were broken off.

A Crisis Coming Up

The R. C. A., according to their rules, will penalize and probably blacklist all R. C. A. members who play the Cheyenne show, but the show has the backing of the International Rodeo Association, being one of the leading members of the I. R. A., and this association has stated that they will not bar anybody or pay any attention to any blacklist of the R. C. A. at any of their member shows.

So all in all, it seems that there is a crisis coming up very rapidly in the rodeo game. It is known that there are quite a number of disgruntled R. C. A. members and these will jump at the chance to pull out of the organization if they feel that they can better their own situation by so doing, and if the R. C. A. is not strong enough to hold together it will go under.

Then the rodeo business would be right back where it was in 1936 before the organization of the R. C. A., which was first called the Cowboys Turtle Association. At that time it was hard for a spectator to know whether he was witnessing a real contest rodeo or a Wild West exhibition advertised as a rodeo.

Girls of the Arena

The Girls' Rodeo Association, organized two years ago for the purpose of promoting more girl events at rodeos, has done a swell job, and now many of the big-time rodeos

(Continued on page 124)

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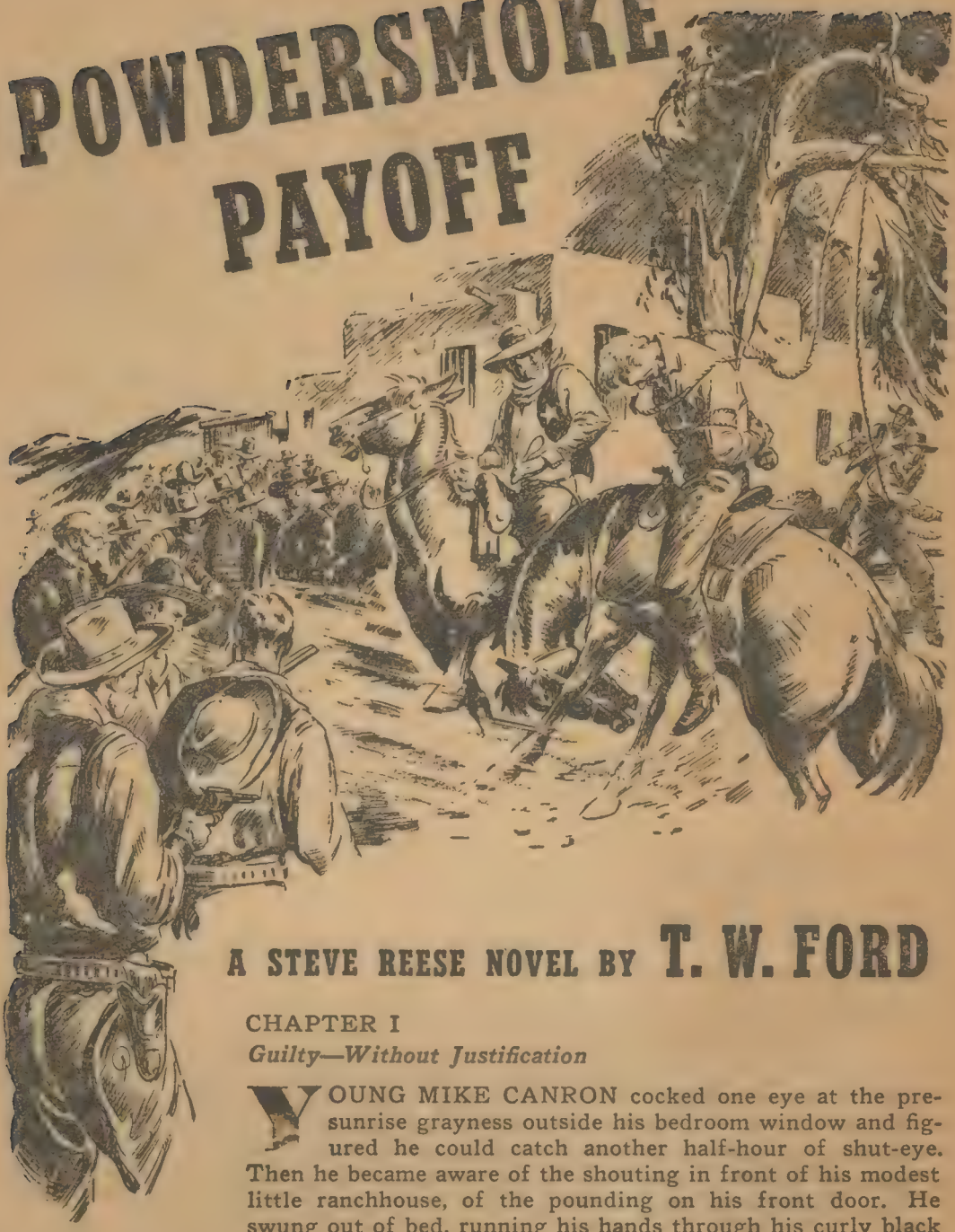


A STEVE REESE NOVEL BY T. W. FORD

CHAPTER I

Guilty—Without Justification

YOUNG MIKE CANRON cocked one eye at the pre-sunrise grayness outside his bedroom window and figured he could catch another half-hour of shut-eye. Then he became aware of the shouting in front of his modest little ranchhouse, of the pounding on his front door. He swung out of bed, running his hands through his curly black

When once-peaceful Ungala Basin is beset by strife that turns each man's hand against his neighbor, the three avengers come riding in!

hair. Then one of his hands instinctively dropped to the .45 Colts on the chair beside the bed. Strange things were happening in the Ungala Basin these days. A man had to be forever on guard.

He pulled on levis and boots, then headed for the stairs, moving with the long strides that befitted such a tall lean-bodied man. He knuckled the sleep from the eyes of his gaunt flat-cheeked face. Blue eyes with a twinkle in them softened the severity of that face. As he reached the hall a voice sang out:

"Mike Canron, you danged chunkhead, wake up! There's trouble. Open up *pronto, prontito, amigo.* It's me—Pancho Smith."

Mike hesitated in the darkness of the hall, though he knew Pancho all right. The dapper son of a Mexican mother and a man from St. Louis, he was the best-loved man in the Ungala Basin. He had built up the old run-down Turkey Foot into a first class outfit. But he would never be wealthy because he always had a hand in his pocket to help out some poor devil in trouble. Sure, Mike knew him, but these days in the Basin a man had to be careful.

Mike eased back the bar across the door, then jumped back into the deeper darkness of the hall.

"Come on in!" he called.

The door was pushed open and a figure was outlined in the opening against the rising light. There was no mistaking sawed-off Pancho, as usual wearing an ornate Mexican "anthill" sombrero, but a plain black suit. As Mike came forward Pancho grabbed his arm.

"*Amigo,* they are going to hang Senor Jim Tasker in Twin Forks today!" he cried. "*Si!*"

"But his trial hasn't even begun yet!" Mike burst out. "Louise would have told me!" Louise was Jim Tasker's daughter, and Mike was going to marry her.

Pancho shook his head. "A rider passed my place a couple of hours ago on his way out from town, said the circuit-riding judge was late. So when he did get into town yesterday afternoon, they started the trial right off because the judge is behind schedule. It'll be over some time this morning. Mike, we can't let them string up old Jim!"

"You're danged right, Pancho! Run down to the bunkhouse and tell Gabe to snake a pony out of the cavvy for me. I'll get into some duds."

In a few more minutes he was swinging into the kak of the paint horse old Gabe had brought up. With the first rays of the still unseen sun spiking over the sweeps of ridges in the east, he and Pancho rode out onto the wagon trail and pushed northward toward the town of Twin Forks.

They passed a bunch of Mike's Stirrup C two-year-olds in the north pasture. With a cowman's practised eye, Mike made a rough count. For these days, in the Basin, cowmen were finding themselves with strange and unexpected additions to their herds. Only the additions didn't bear their brand marks. There had been charges, allegations. It was a mysterious kind of rustling, one in reverse, but bringing bad blood, making enemies of friends.

RANCHER Jim Tasker had found that out. In his case it had led to trouble which had culminated in a killing. That was what he was standing trial for now, charged not only with being a rustler, but a killer.

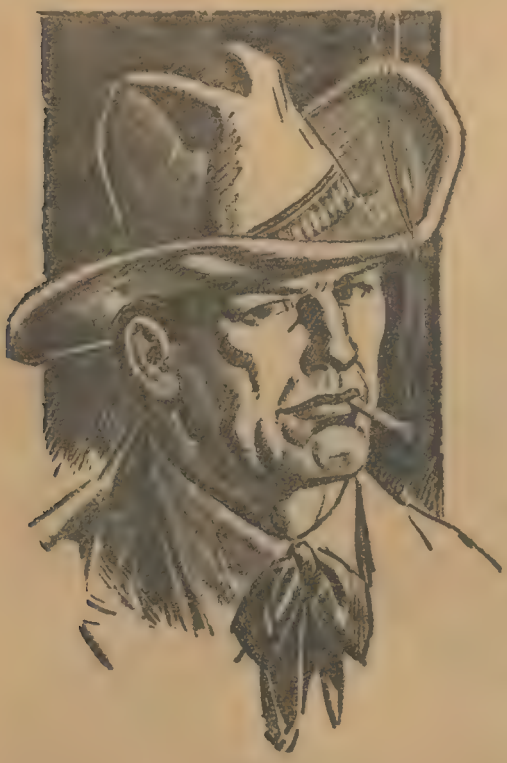
They crossed Sheepman's Creek with the ground mist boiling around the ponies' legs.

"Pancho," Mike asked, "how do you figure it? Jim can't be guilty! He would not rustle a piece of table beef even if his family was starving. And he's no killer, heaven knows!"

"*Si.* That is true." Pancho rose in his stirrups to point west over the prairie ground swells. Off there, rising out of

the sea of mist stood the big 'dobe *rancho* of "Solo John" Cain, cow king of the Ungala Basin. In size and grandeur it was like a palace.

"That one," Pancho said softly, "the Senor Solo John, him I suspect. There is no evidence. But him with his jail-



STEVE REESE

bird spread, perhaps—" He left the rest unsaid. But he was not the only one in the Basin who resented John Cain's hiring ex-criminals as his bunkhouse hands, or who referred to the outfit as a "jailbird spread."

Mike frowned, wondering about Cain. As wealthy as the cattleman was, he lived like a hermit in his sprawling adobe castle, and needed nothing he did not possess. But sometimes wealth bred greed. The man *could* have some diabolical plan afoot to grab more.

That brought Mike's thoughts back to Jim Tasker—and to gray-eyed, auburn-haired Louise. If they strung up her father . . . Mike's jaws set grimly.

It was about an hour short of midday when he and Pancho sloped across the railroad tracks into the cow town of Twin Forks. In the last couple of years, since the railroad spur had been extended down through Piñon Pass, the Forks had doubled in size. And it was still growing. As they rode by the loading pens in the freight yard, they could hear the pound of hammers, the grind of saws, could catch the smell of fresh green lumber from the stores and buildings going up along the street. In open lots, tents with stove pipes protruding from the rear had been thrown up as places of business and as temporary homes. Twin Forks was booming. And the citizenry of the Forks was grimly determined that the majesty and power of the law would keep pace with its growth. Law and order helped business.

That was what Jim Tasker was bucking in his trial. Every cowman out on the Basin knew it. The odds were all against him.

Mike Canron and Pancho sent their horses single-footing between the horses at hitchrails and the ranch buckboards and buggies flanking them. There was barely a foot of empty space along Main Street. And throngs stood and gossiped or moved slowly along the wobbly uneven sidewalks to avoid the mud in the road following the spring rains. It looked as if most of the countryside had come in for the trial.

Mike and Pancho neared the meeting house which was serving as a courthouse. A crowd of men fanned out from the door halfway into the road. The two riders left their ponies with Pancho's two cowhands who were already on hand and pushed into the crowd. Almost everybody knew little Pancho and good-humoredly opened an alley to him. In

the big vestibule a hawk-nosed deputy started to block their way, then he recognized Mike. "Well, seein' you're sorta one of the family, Canron," he said, "reckon you can go in."

Inside they had to stand at the back of the temporary courtroom, looking over the heads of folks sitting close-packed on the long backless benches. Mike caught his breath as he saw Louise Tasker sitting on a front bench, her willowy body tensed forward, her creamy-skinned face beneath the burnished dark red hair drawn with concentration.

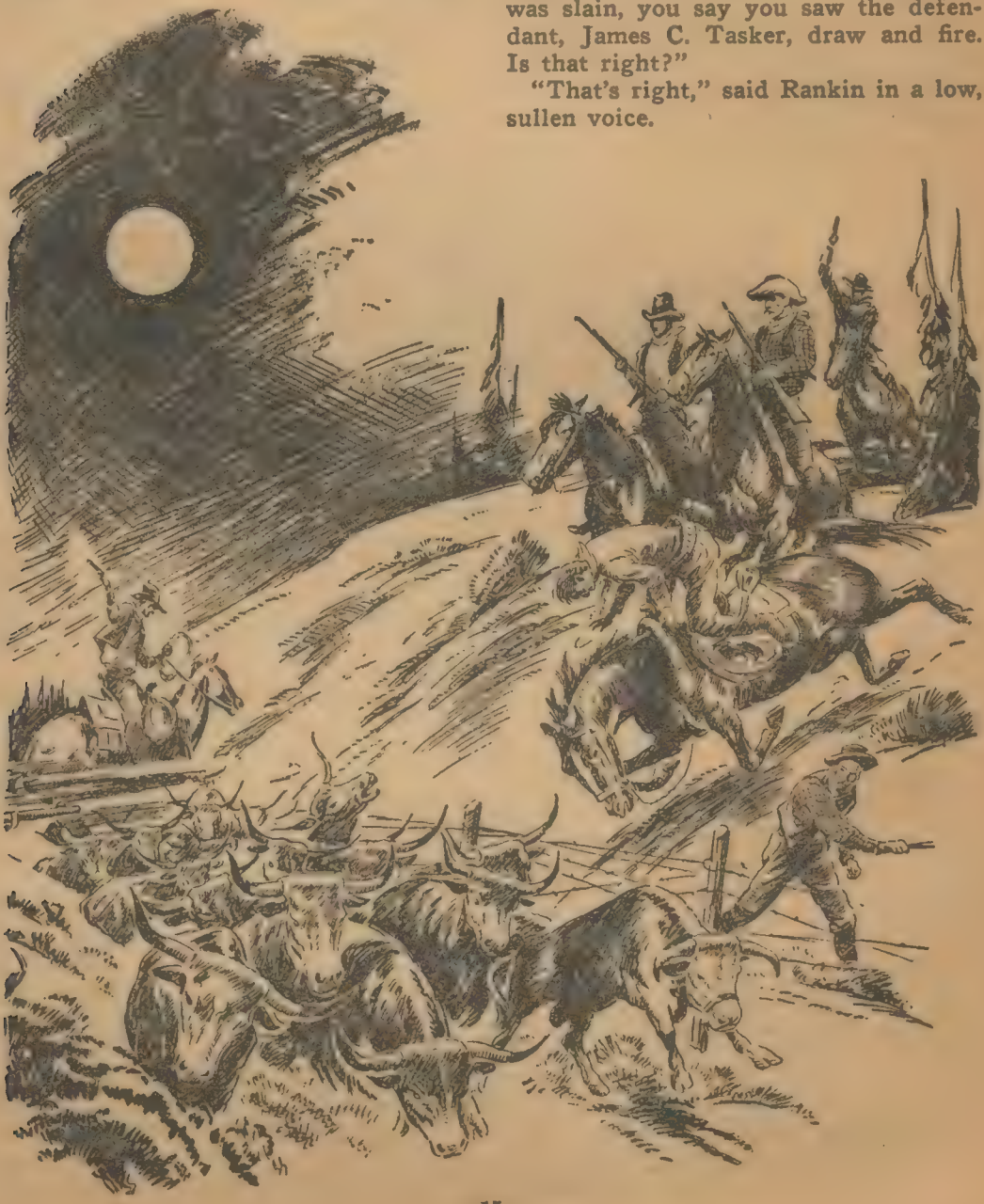
Adam Bevans, the bald-headed defense attorney, had just risen from behind the defense table. Beside him sat Jim Tasker, big, white-maned, straight as a ramrod. "If Your Honor pleases," Bevans said, "I would like to put the cowhand, Rankin, on the stand again."

Reese steadied his rifle as a barrage of lead stormed from the other side of the fence, straight at the herd (CHAP. V)

The long-nosed bespectacled judge nodded, beckoned to a seedy-looking man in levis and a checkered shirt sitting in the front row. Rankin, a hand on the pay roll of an outfit called the Running-L, rose and moved on bowed short legs to the witness chair beside the judge's desk. He knuckled his spiky hair as he sat down and paunchy Adam Bevans walked over in front of him. Rankin was a lumpy-faced, homely, nondescript save for the stamp of leathery hardness on his countenance.

"In the trouble at the fenceline, Mr. Rankin," Bevans intoned, wagging a fat finger at the witness, "when Allen Rice was slain, you say you saw the defendant, James C. Tasker, draw and fire. Is that right?"

"That's right," said Rankin in a low, sullen voice.



"Was there any shot fired before that one?"

"Naw. No shot before Tasker's."

"That's all." The lawyer turned away.

IN THE rear of the hall, a man beside Mike Canron snorted:

"Saints and sinners, is Adam Bevans trying to hang his own client?"

The judge looked at lean, saturnine Jed Nichols, appointed prosecutor by the town. Nichols, with a sharkish smile, shook his head.

"The prosecution rests," he drawled. He seemed to be confident he had won.

The circuit judge turned to the jury, seated in a double row along the side wall on chairs from Fresing's undertaking parlor, told them they would retire and ballot on the verdict. A bailiff led them through a door into the room that usually was the vestry. He closed the door behind them. The judge took a drink of water from the cracked china pitcher on the desk.

Nobody left the courtroom. There was a murmur of excited voices, but it seemed as if nobody moved. Mike studied Jim Tasker, sitting with a hand braced against his forehead. He wore a baffled look. The old cowman would have known how to halt a stampede, how to deal with some gopher who tried to swing a gun on him and whipsaw him. But this courtroom procedure, this being charged with killing, was something he didn't know how to fight. Mike's eyes swung back to Louise. His heart gripped him at her helplessness.

The judge's gavel hammered down. He was peering over his pince nez at the spectators as if surprised to find them still there.

"This court will adjourn till—" he began and stopped short.

There was a hammering from the other side of the vestry door. The bailiff opened it, spoke to somebody inside. He turned to the judge and nodded. The judge nodded back.

"Bring them in," the judge muttered, and Mike Canron's heart sank like a stone into a pool. Reaching a verdict so quickly could mean only one thing.

The jury filed back in. Then the foreman, Ab Curtiss who ran the dry goods and notions store in town, rose.

"We made our decison—I mean, Your Honor, we reached a verdict."

"What is your verdict?" the judge asked wearily.

"Guilty of killing—and without justification, Judge."

Those final words, "without justification" seemed to hang in the air of the courtroom for minutes. That meant, the jury recommended no mercy, that they felt the extreme penalty was warranted. It was bad! Mike hardly heard the judge announce a two-hour recess, stating that when court reconvened he would sentence the convicted man.

Mike had rushed to Louise a moment after the foreman has spoken the fatal words. She had risen to stand as straight as a blade, her head held high, her gray eyes level. The rise and fall of her chest against her simple gray dress was the only sign of emotion she showed. Then she swept forward, gracefully somehow, with the air of a princess, to hold her father tight in her arms before he was led out the back way to return to the jailhouse. She swayed slightly when she came back to where her uncle and aunt, town folks, were sitting. Mike Canron gripped her arm sympathetically.

"Don't worry, Louise—Jim's got friends," he said, struggling to curb his own excitement and angry resentment. "We won't let him down."

She smiled wanly, touched his tanned cheek quickly, lightly. "They mustn't hang him, Jim—he's innocent," she said huskily. "They mustn't!"

"They won't!" he promised her grimly. "We'll do something."

With his heart in his eyes he watched her go away with her relatives, ushered out through the vestry door by one of the sheriff's deputies.

He started, when someone touched him on the arm, and he whirled quickly. It was Pancho.

"Senor Jim's friends, they meet at Sad Sam's place, Mike," Pancho said.

CHAPTER II

Enter the CPA

OUTSIDE the meeting house Mike and Pancho forced their way through the throng. On all sides men were discussing the sudden verdict, pro and con.

"Sure, Tasker's been well known here for years," one man was holding forth. "Fine reputation — quick-tempered, though. But a man can always make his first mistake. He'll hang!"

Mike could stand no more of that. He hurried Pancho, and the pair legged it over the hump midway along Twin Forks' main street, past the Prairie Trust Company on the corner, and on toward the big bluff standing like a scowling menace to the west of the cow-town. Near the blacksmith shop, they turned into a crooked side street and entered a mangy low-ceiled barroom. Only the rag-tag and two-bits of the *pueblo* hung out in "Sad Sam's."

The others who had rallied to the defense of Jim Tasker were already at a table in the corner of the ill-lit place. There was Harris of the Rafter H, a raw-boned coffin-faced man. His *segundo* sat beside him. There was "Dutchman" Gainor who operated the Circle G adjoining Mike Canron's place on the east, a beefy bull-chested, usually smiling man. But there were no smiles now, just nods of greeting as Mike and Pancho Smith sat down. This was grim business.

The Dutchman whacked the table so that the bottle in the center jumped.

"We got to stop it—with trigger play if necessary, gents! I got three of my boys with me who'll back any play I make. Now—"

"They mean to hang him all right," Harris said glumly.

"There's only one way to stop 'em," Mike Canron declared hotly. "And that's by lead—or the threat of it, by grab!"

Pancho smiled around at his table companions. "It is not time for the big noise, *senores.* We must talk soft and make plans."

Over at the bar, a chubby, sleepy-eyed gent with a paunch that bulged over his belt seemed suddenly to be feeling his drink. Sad Sam, the owner, who was back of the bar, blinked at him in surprise. He was thinking—this fat jasper with the stogie butt that seemed to have grown into his mouth had seemed sober enough when he had trailed in after that pair who had gone to the table with the others. But now the man's ruddy moon of face seemed to sag loosely. His two hundred and fifty pounds of carcass began to sway.

Then the man mumbled: "Reckon I need just a leetle shut-eye."

He turned and rocked across the little barroom to drop down on a chair at a table next to the one where those cowmen were conferring. He dropped his head onto his crossed forearms and began to snore. They gave him a look, then ignored him.

And "Dusty" Trail, one of the best known detectives in the Cattlemen's Protective Association, and one of the two main aides of Steve Reese, the noted field chief, was within earshot of what those cowmen were planning. . . .

Steve Reese himself had sloped into Twin Forks only a short while before. Dusty Trail had been with him. Reese had had a special reason for being interested in Jim Tasker's trial, so had at once dispatched Dusty to the courtroom to see what he could pick up.

Dusty had watched a man—he had not known the man was Mike Canron—rush to the side of Tasker's daughter when the verdict was announced. And on a hunch, he had followed him and the swarthy man he had heard someone in the crowd call Pancho Smith when the pair had left the courtroom. He had had no chance as yet to report to the field chief.

Now Reese was sitting over a cup of java in a Chinese eating place. Across

the table from him was the other of his two trusted lieutenants, another CPA operator, red-headed, good-looking Hank Ball. Reese's own expression was sober enough, in all truth, but there was a hint of laughter in the redhead's eyes. For no matter how serious a predicament might be, Hank never could keep that dancing devil-may-care look out of his blue eyes.

Even now. And at this moment he *was* serious. Steve Reese had sent him into Twin Forks a few hours ahead of Dusty and himself, to make a preliminary survey of a situation that had become so serious that it had come to the attention of the CPA, and to glean what information he could.

THAT was an old trick of the field chief's, dividing his forces for better information and speedier action—one of the things that made Colonel Beauvine at the home office place so much confidence in Reese, "Doc" as his two aides had dubbed him. Steve Reese, Beauvine declared, always knew what he was about.

And Reese had reason to be sure now, for he fully realized this was going to be a hard case to crack, a situation where, on the surface, there was rustling in reverse. Cows were being run *onto* a man's spread instead of *off* of it.

"And that's how this Jim Tasker happened to be brought to trial," Hank Ball said, concluding his resume of what had happened in the Basin to date. "Looks like he couldn't of been guilty, Doc—but you never can tell."

Hank shrugged off his seriousness as he picked up his cup of java and grinned at a yellow-haired girl from the honky-tonk next door, who was eating with a friend. She smiled. Hank was hard to resist—and he never tried to do any resisting himself, where a woman was concerned.

"I see . . ." Reese lighted up a tube of Durham and frowned as he concentrated.

The yellow-haired girl was eyeing him now, admiringly, though he was unaware of it. Steve Reese was the sort of man who always caught a woman's attention, although he took little interest in that, one way or the other—the opposite of Hank Ball.

Reese was a husky six-footer whose raven-black hair, graying at the temples gave him a distinguished look, the look which had not escaped Hank Ball and Dusty Trail who, vowing that he seemed more like a professor or professional man than a fighting cow detective, had promptly given him that nickname, "Doc."

But he was a fighting man, and from his crystal-clear black eyes down, every inch of him seemed to bespeak quiet leashed power. Even without those criss-crossed shell belts he wore and the pair of black-butted .38s at his hips, he had the stamp of a man who can take care of himself.

He could, and not with six-guns alone. For he was adept at any kind of hand-to-hand or fist-to-fist combat, as well as being a past master of knife work, and as expert at judo or ju jutsu as with rifle or carbine.

When not on duty he was always nattily and immaculately clad, but he suited his garb to the occasion. At present, rigged out in a plain hickory shirt, batwing chaps, and a gray sombrero he might have been any wandering cowboy. But the college-trained man who had once been a lieutenant of police in St. Louis before he had heard the call of the West was far from that. And he sensed that on this case he was going to need every notch of the skill which had earned him the reputation of being the best range detective in half a dozen states.

Running cows *onto* a man's range, as was happening here, seemed loco. Yet it had caused plenty of trouble, had the whole Ungala Basin on pins and needles. And it had been responsible for this killing for which a rancher named Jim Tasker seemed due to have his neck stretched.

Twice, before the man Tasker was supposed to have killed was gunned down,

cowmen had discovered strange stuff run through their fence line. A man they called Dutchman Gainor had found some Running L stuff on his land, had returned it. Then the sheriff and a deputy, summoned by Matt Lever of the Running L, had tracked down some missing stuff to an arroyo inside Tasker's fence.

Tasker had claimed to have no knowledge of how the cows had come to be there, and the matter for a time had seemed to simmer down, until a couple of weeks ago when more Running L stuff had been rustled.

Three of Matt Lever's cowhands, among them a man named Rankin, had trailed the cattle to a hastily mended break in Tasker's western fence line. They had passed through and found the missing cows hidden in a brush corral up a coulee in the broken country on the north end of Tasker's range. And almost simultaneously Jim Tasker himself had arrived on the scene. With him had been a nephew, a ne'er-do-well who spent his month's wages on red-eye, but whom Tasker had given a job and put on his pay-roll.

IN THE thin drizzle that blurred everything, there had been hot words. Shooting irons had jumped out when Allen Rice, the man now dead, had accused Jim Tasker of being a rustler. The next thing, Rice had been sprawled on the ground beside his cayuse, dying fast, with a slug in his chest from Tasker's smoking gun. Rankin, the cowhand who had testified in court this day, as Reese had already heard, had come into town and sworn before the sheriff that Jim Tasker had killed Rice when Tasker had been caught with rustled stock.

Then—the trial, when the circuit judge had arrived.

Apparently Hank Ball had been thinking along the same lines as the silent Reese, now that the yellow-haired girl had taken her reluctant departure, for he said abruptly:

"It'll be the rope for Tasker, Doc."

The ramshackle little restaurant trembled as the rising gusty wind moaned in the alley between it and the barber shop. Reese hadn't noticed it before, in his preoccupation.

"What about the third man of the Running L?" he asked. "Did he testify against Tasker as Rankin did?"

Hank shook his carrot-topped head. "That third man, Doc, a waddy named Bennis, has simply vanished," he said. "Left the ranch to go to town and never been seen since. Left his warbag behind him in the bunkhouse. And didn't wait to collect his time, either."

Steve Reese's fingers beat a faster tattoo on the oilcloth-covered table top. That wasn't like a cowhand; any cowhand. No matter how itchy his heel got, he would wait for the foreman to tally up his time book, and get what was coming to him.

"This Rankin," Reese said thoughtfully, watching the wind whip the sunbonnet off a passing woman, "who practically put the noose around Jim Tasker's neck at the trial—how long has he been on the Lever pay-roll?"

Hank Ball looked sheepish. He had forgotten to check that. "But he ain't so well known here in town, Doc."

Reese nodded, then asked about Tasker's nephew. That young fellow, it seemed, had cut and run before the shooting started. When he was on the stand in court, he said he knew nothing about it. After the verdict, he had left town, quitting the Basin flat.

Reese shook his head. "Not a thing to work on. Tasker's never been either a rustler or a killer. Still, when a man gets desperate financially—"

He had already visited the Prairie Trust Company. Posing as a cattle buyer and presenting some bogus identification papers from a Kansas City meat packing house, which he carried for such purposes, he had dropped in at the bank and made inquiries concerning the financial status of several of the ranchmen in the Basin, including Jim Tasker's name in the list. He had learned that Tasker, since last year's drought, was mortgaged

to the ears and even behind in his interest payments.

Hank Ball cocked an eyebrow. For once the amiable reckless redhead showed he was serious. "Somehow, Doc, I don't think Jim Tasker did that rustlin'," he declared.

Reese picked up his gray headpiece. "Only thing to do, I reckon, is to have a talk with this John Cain of the Umbrella Spread. He's the one who reported the conditions here to the CPA."

John Cain had written Colonel Beauvine, briefly telling about the peculiar rustling in reverse that was going on in Ungala Basin. Cain was a member of the CPA, though neither Reese nor the Colonel knew him personally. But Hank Ball had dug up facts on him here in Twin Forks, chiefly through asking innocent-sounding questions around at the bars. He had posed as a waddy looking for a good bunkhouse berth at tophand pay. As a result, Steve Reese had a pretty good book on the cattle king of the Ungala. And he knew about that peculiar habit of Cain's of hiring exconvicts almost exclusively. Hank also had told him that Cain had been present at the trial.

"Probably be down at the hotel now," Steve Reese reasoned. "We'll drop in there."

As they left the eating place Reese noticed a sadfaced man over by the hitchrail, leaning on a heavy gnarled cane. His right leg seemed to be twisted. There was the look of a martyr to pain on his hollow-cheeked face. His whole manner was obsequious, retiring. He was talking to a tall flat-bodied man in a blue shirt.

THE two CPA men moved up the street. Half a block and Hank turned his head, apparently to follow a passing girl with his eyes. But it was for more than that. "A sawbuck against a dobie dollar, Doc, that we're being followed."

"Any idea by whom?" Reese asked.

"The tall gopher in the blue shirt who was talking to the cripple at the hitchrack."

"Let's cross the road and see."

They crossed the half-dried mud of the main street. On the other side, Hank Ball deliberately dropped his quirly. As he bent to pick it up, he looked back past his right leg.

"Yep, he's coming, Doc," Hank said. "Trailing us."

Reese's mouth hardened. He didn't like the idea of having it known who he was when he had just hit the *pueblo*. He spoke to Hank and they turned up the steps of a big general store. It was well filled, with everybody talking about the trial. A little group stood just inside the double doors. Reese quickly quartered around them, Hank hard on his heels.

The man in the blue shirt and shotgun pants entered. He was built like a pole. His shoe button eyes darted to the counter, then flicked around as he sought Reese and the redhead, his knife-thin lips pressed tight. As he pushed forward through the customers the CPA men went on around the little knot at the door and out, recrossed the road, and moved down toward the hotel.

"There's Solo John Cain now," Hank said. He jabbed a finger toward a slim, impressive figure on the wide white-pillared veranda of the Basin House. The man had iron-gray hair, a finely-chiseled profile, and the air of a hawk. He seemed to be looking over other peoples' heads as if he didn't see them. His garb was plainly expensive.

Steve Reese knew, after the incident of that man following them, that he had to be extra cautious.

"Hank, tell Cain I'm in Room Twenty-eight, that it's important I see him. But also important for me not to be seen with him. I'll go in the side door."

Reese had been in his hotel room, Number 28, for about five minutes when there was a rap on the door. Standing behind it as he swung it open, one hand filled, he waited for Solo John Cain to walk in. Instead, it was a scar-cheeked Cain cowhand with a message.

"Mr. Cain said to tell you he's in Room Twenty-one, mister," the man said, speaking without movement of the lips,

from the corner of his mouth, that old prison trick. "He'll see you at once if you have any business with him." Then he stalked off down the hall.

Steve Reese was irritated for a moment. Cain had written the CPA, apparently wanting help here. Now he seemed to be standing on some false pride, acting like a member of foreign nobility. And that "if you have any business with him" really irked Reese. Was the man a fool?

But a couple of minutes later, he was down at the other end of the hall, knocking on the door of Room 21. When he stepped in in response to a gruff "Come in," he saw it was really a suite, a sitting room with a bedroom off it.

The aristocratic-looking Cain in his custom-made rig sat in a chair, one high-polished boot crossed over his knee, smoking a thin black cigar. Three cowhands, all with tied-down guns, were also in the room. Eyes with the cold fire in them scoured Reese from the tip of his gray sombrero to his spurs, studying him as if he were some trail bum come to beg a favor. Reese felt himself paling. He didn't like it.

"Yes?" said Cain in a flat voice. "Your name's Reese, I believe. What can I do for you?"

The CPA field chief said, keeping his choler penned up:

"I'd prefer to talk to you privately, Mr. Cain."

CHAPTER III

End of a Hang-Tree

JOHN CAIN drew on his thin cigar, then nodded to his three cowhands. No verbal instructions seemed necessary. Two of them stepped into the bedroom, closing the door after them. The third went by Reese and out into the hall, closing that door, too. As he did, Reese saw the man unshucking his hogleg. It was all strange.

"Just to make things official, Mr. Cain," Reese said, pulling his hand from a secret pocket in his waistband.

The engraved silver shield he displayed read:

Field Chief
Cattlemen's Protective Association

He watched Cain nod, his manner still impersonal. Reese was somewhat baffled, unused to receptions like this.

"You wrote Colonel Beauvine about certain conditions here in the Basin, Mr. Cain."

The cattle king nodded, again drawing on his cigar. He held it in a long-fingered white-skinned hand. The paleness of those hands was explained by the pair of white doeskin gauntlets draped over the arm of the easy chair in which he sat. Reese was acutely aware that the man had not offered to shake hands with him.

"I did," Cain said curtly. "I wrote because I considered it my duty as a member of the Association. That is all."

Reese forced a smile. "Yes, Colonel Beauvine appreciated that. Cooperation is a great help in our job. Now if you'll give me the details of the setup here, anything you know—"

Solo John Cain cut him off. "I told you all I knew in the letter to the Colonel, Reese."

Steve Reese pulled in his breath hard, and silently counted to ten. The big frame building shook like a live thing in the buffeting of a fresh burst of the wind which now was almost at gale force.

"Well, then, Cain," Reese said. "There are some questions I'd like to ask. Now—"

Solo John Cain rose from the mohair with an alacrity that belied his iron-gray hair. He made an impatient gesture.

"I stated what I knew in my letter. That is all I can tell you. That is all I know. So—"

"But—" Reese began.

"And I do not care to become involved in the matter any further, Reese," he snapped. "It is your business to take care of matters like this. That's why I pay dues to your organization. I now wash my hands of the whole matter." He raised his voice. "Hutson!"

The man out in the hall stepped in. It was Cain's sign of dismissal. But he added in a milder voice, "If you should find the pack behind this, you might get some unexpected help."

Reese met Hank Ball on the porch downstairs. He smiled wryly when Hank asked him how he had made out.

"He treated me like a barroom bum trying to make a two-bit touch," Reese drawled. "Or a leper. I'm beginning to suspect the righteous John Cain who hires jailbirds and ex-outlaws to ride his range."

"But, Doc, if he's mixed up in this haywire business, why would he report it?" Hank asked.

"The best cover-up in the world, Hank. Nobody suspects the man who reports a thing."

Hank whistled softly as a deputy appeared in the double doorway of the meeting house up the street a little distance on the other side. It was after two. Court had reconvened, and sentence had just been passed. The deputy bawled to the crowd:

"It's hangin'! Tasker stretches rope!"

"When, I wonder?" Reese said.

Hank Ball had all the details. "Right off—pronto. They got what they call the 'Hanging Tree' down there next to the jail. They—"

A fresh burst of wind of almost gale-like force roared up the street, scooping up a wall of dust. It ripped down the hay and feed store sign with a crash.

Reese, thinking fast, was paying no attention to the elements, or to outside matters. What was in his mind was that he had no authority to interfere with the local law, yet he wanted to. There was something queer about this whole business in the Ungala Basin that didn't fit. He paused quickly as he heard a voice he recognized.

"Yes-sirree, friends, they's goin' to be trouble when they try that noose on Jim Tasker for size! Trouble, I said." It was the deep voice of paunchy, stogie-smoking Dusty Trail over by the porch steps.

Dusty would have been recognized by the reek of that stogie of his, even if he had not been seen. His addiction to his vile-smelling cheroots was a constant cause of bickering between him and Hank Ball, although that was never serious, as it seemed to be. Hank and Dusty were too close friends for actual trouble ever to arise between them. But Hank loved to taunt his partner.

Dusty entered by a side door, and didn't even look at Reese and Ball as he ambled on by them.

"Certain rancher friends of Tasker's held a little parley," he was saying, apparently to nobody in particular. "Them two fellers headin' down to the jail now—the little one with the Mexican blood in him, called Pancho Smith, and that tall young Irishman, his handle is Mike Canron—they were at the parley."

Dusty Trail expelled a cloud of stogie smoke in Hank Ball's direction. Hank grimaced and pulled off his sombrero to fan away the malodorous fumes.

Dusty mumbled on, aloud: "Uh-huh. Them and the others plan to make a shootin' ruckus and whisk Tasker off in the confusion. I heard 'em plannin' it all out."

REESE gave a quick nod to show that he had heard all of the rambling, apparently drunken, mutterings and understood.

He saw Canron and the swarthy little Mexican-American amble by the jail yard and lounge against the corner of a whisky mill next to it. The Mexican pulled out a bandanna and wiped the wind-swept dust from his face.

Down at the depot, a locomotive hooted and a three-car train clanked away. The smoke from the engine's stack was beaten flat by the wind so that it streamed out horizontally at right angles to the train as it disappeared around

a wooded curve. Over in the lot, one of the deputies had the manila hemp that was to hang a man looped over the limb of the hang-tree and was widening the loop running through the hangman's knot at the other end. Another was bringing up a cayuse.

Still uncertain about what role to play, though he was violently opposed to being a witness even to a legal hanging, Steve Reese moved down the steps and across the street. The crowd was already pouring down for the hanging ceremony in little knots and groups of excited jabbering citizens. A man in a black coat, with a carbine sloped through his crooked arm, stepped before Reese and Hank Ball.

"You're strangers here," he announced roughly. "What's your business?"

Steve Reese sized him up calmly, noting the small piece of red ribbon pinned to the lapel of his coat.

"What business is that of yours, mister?" he asked, level-voiced. "Are you the Law?"

"Member of the Vigilante Committee," the man said harshly. "Wanta answer questions in a nice way, or get shoved outa town?"

Reese drew the silver shield of the CPA from his pocket and gave the big man a quick flash of it. The fellow nodded.

"All right, gents. We just gotta be careful. Word's got out that some parties aim to make trouble." He moved on.

Men began to swirl around the CPA operations. But Reese picked out two more grim-jawed men he realized were Vigilantes. One man had a little piece of red ribbon worked through the buttonhole of his shirt. The other had the ribbon hanging out of a vest pocket beside a couple of cigars. Both toted double-barreled shotguns. Twin Forks was primed for trouble, set to go through with the hanging despite any interference. Peering between heads, Reese saw

Reese ripped home a couple of lightning-fast jabs that set Dan back on his heels (CHAP. VII)

that three more men had joined Canron and little Mexican-American by the corner of the barroom building.

Then there was a gasp from the throng that milled slowly, hanging onto their hats in the fierce buffeting of the wind. For the jailhouse door had opened. A local preacher in a flat black hat stepped out first. Then came the sheriff, Wilson, a squat big-eyed man, holding Jim Tasker by one arm. The doomed man's arms were lashed behind him with rawhide. He held himself erect and controlled, striding steadily. Two deputies followed. Twin Forks wasted no time in dispensing its justice.

Wilson bellowed for the crowd to stand back, then his cortege walked quickly across the jail yard and into the side lot with its hard, beaten-down earth. Steve Reese was moving, too, by then, slipping through the throng. He got over near the men with Mike Canron, at the corner of the saloon. They were edging forward to be in the front ranks. Nobody noticed them, for all eyes were fixed in fascination on the man who was due to get his neck stretched.

The wind whipped in off the range now like an angry shrew. And the great cottonwood, the "Hanging Tree," weaved over at the top and groaned like a thing in agony.

Then they were hoisting Tasker aboard the waiting cayuse. The preacher droned unintelligibly from an open prayer book. Wilson put a fresh-built lighted quirly in the prisoner's mouth. Jim Tasker puffed deep a couple of times, then spat it out.

"Thanks, Wilson," he said clearly. "The grub in your jail ain't half bad, either. Now let's get this little piece of business done."

The sheriff, mounted now himself, removed Jim Tasker's sombrero, took the noose after missing it twice in the wind. The cottonwood above them groaned down its trunk again as its top thrashed in the fury of the wind. Wilson fumbled the noose over Jim Tasker's head. Meanwhile Steve Reese, with Hank Ball, had eased in behind Mike Canron and the others with him in the front rank of spectators.

Reese had already noticed several of those men with the bits of red ribbon in the ranks directly behind the friends of the doomed man. And two more of them were across the yard, near the side of the jail, their eyes pinned on Canron and his friends. Plainly, they suspected something.

Out in the middle of the yard, under the tree, the two men on the other end of the rope slung it over the bough, drew it taut, and braced themselves. A deputy stood behind the condemned man's horse, quirt upraised to lash it and send it bolting from beneath Tasker.

Then Mike Canron hissed something to the men surrounding him, as his hand plunged for his holster. In a split second, he froze. For Reese's right-hand weapon was denting Canron's back.

"Don't do it," Reese said, low-voiced. "I got a proddy trigger finger, mister. Don't! Pen the hardware!"

BESIDE Canron, Pancho Smith jerked half around and saw what was happening.

"*Sangre de Cristo!*" he sputtered, paling.

"You want your friend to keep breathing?" Reese said, forced to raise his voice to be heard above the howl of the wind. "Then stand steady!"

Pancho said something sibilantly to the others. Their hands fell hesitantly away from gun butts. Out there in the yard, a small upper branch of the venerable cottonwood came crashing down.

"All right!" Sheriff Wilson got out thickly, lifting a hand.

Something caused Reese to glance over his shoulder. Back in the road amidst the silent throng was the sad-faced cripple, who had been in front of the Chinese restaurant. He was now on horseback. Only now his benign, martyr-like look was gone. Instead, his lips were peeled back over yellowed teeth like an animal scenting the kill. And from the deep-set eyes shone malevolent glee.

The wind lashed with increased fury,

like an animal growling from a cave. There was a crash like a cannon report. The cottonwood was bent toward the southeast. And that time it didn't thrash back. A great raw white rent opened halfway down the trunk from the top. Then the great tree toppled over slowly into the back yard of the jail, crushing a shed. It had broken off halfway down the trunk.

And now there was no official place to hang Tasker.

Within half an hour, after the wind storm had blown itself out, Sheriff Wilson issued a statement. First thing in the morning, he said, carpenters would start to work building a scaffold in the jail yard. It was time, anyway, that Twin Forks had a proper gibbet. They planned to have it completed by some time late tomorrow afternoon, and the postponed hanging of Tasker would take place the following morning at sunrise.

"Sure ain't a heap of time for us to work in," Dusty Trail said to Steve Reese, lugubriously. He had come up to Reese's hotel room.

The pudgy operator was so upset he had forgotten to relight his cold stogie. A man who looked easy-going and phlegmatic, he could get plenty riled up when he witnessed some example of injustice. He smashed one fist into the palm of his other hand.

"We got to save that little filly's dad somehow, Doc," he growled. "I'm ready to help bust open that jail right away if you say the word!"

CHAPTER IV

Doc Reese Starts Action

REESE paced back to the window. Hank Ball, for once solemn-faced, watched him worriedly. This wasn't like Doc. He usually knew where he was headed.

Reese was thinking about how they had been followed, though their identity and arrival in town were supposed to be secret. And he was also bewildered by the actions of Solo John Cain who had refused to cooperate at all. Then his thoughts turned to that cripple and the vengeful look that had been on the fellow's face when Tasker was about to stretch rope.

Reese turned and stabbed a finger at Dusty as the fat cowboy fired up a fresh stogie. Hank Ball grimaced as usual.

"Send him somewheres out on the range—in the open air, Doc," Hank grumbled. "So I won't have to stand that second-hand rope he smokes."

Reese paid no attention.

"Dusty," he said, "there's a man in this town I want you to watch, to follow. See what you can learn about him. I'm sure he's a stranger here too." Then he described the cripple with the inef-

[*Turn page*]

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fably sad face. He remembered something else he had noted about the man. "He's wearing a plain gray flannel shirt."

Dusty nodded, tucking his own shirt down over the paunch above his belt. That paunch was a great aid in giving the roly-poly detective the deceptive appearance that was one of his main assets. It emphasized his soft, flabby look, but it certainly gave no indication of the whip-cord muscles beneath what seemed to be layers of fat, nor of the speed and deadly accuracy with which he could go into action with fists or guns when the need arose. For Dusty Trail's apparent fat was *not* fat, but only a nicely padded overlay for a frame that was in prime condition.

Likewise, his baby-blue eyes which many would have sworn had an innocent-looking nearsighted gleam in them, were in no sense myopic. On the contrary, they were so perfect that it was one of Hank Ball's proudest boasts that his pard could cut the buttons off a gambler's vest with his six and not smoke the cloth. Dusty was fit, all right, and at the moment he was spoiling for action, which Doc Reese did not seem inclined to furnish for him right away.

Reese went on, picking up his gray sombrero:

"Hank, you and I are going to pay a little call on Miss Louise Tasker, the convicted man's daughter. Maybe there's some scrap of information we can pick up that can help us—and her. . . You go on out first, Dusty." He didn't want all three of them to be seen together.

Dusty stepped into the hall, pulling the door closed behind him. The men in the room could hear the rattle of his spurs fading away down the hall. The next moment came the whiplash crackle of gun reports.

Reese was out of the door in a flash, Hank Ball jumping after him, both clawing at holsters. Halfway down the stairs, Dusty's two hundred and fifty pounds of flesh and bone and sinew was stretched prone on the carpet with the pattern of faded roses.

"Somebody got Dusty!" Hank shouted. "The dirty, drygulchin'—"

But Reese had quickly seen the cocked, leveled gun pushed out before his stout aide.

"Somebody waitin' on the stairs!" Dusty spat out, jumping up as Steve Reese sprinted past him. "Just ran down!"

The CPA field chief flung himself close against the wall on the same side as the staircase as he neared it. He jumped around the corner. There was nobody in sight. As he ran down to the landing halfway to the lobby the little bespectacled clerk in the shiny alpaca coat bobbed out from behind the desk.

"What's going on upstairs?" he piped. "Three gents just went a-busting out the side door! This is a respectable house!"

"The side door uh?" Hank Ball called.

He and Dusty shot on past Reese and across the empty lobby. Steve Reese didn't follow. Their quarry would be lost in the throng on the street by now. He told the clerk it was just some drunken waddies and went back up the stairs. He was sure of one thing. The gunmen hadn't meant to kill Dusty. In ambush, guns out before he appeared, they couldn't have missed a target like Dusty if they had wanted to kill. No, it had just been to scare him, to scare them off. But it was another proof that somebody knew who they were.

HE HAD just reached the top of the stairs when a man emerged from a room a little to the left. It was the sad-faced man with the cane. He nodded to Reese.

"What's all the excitement about?" he inquired in a thin, flat voice. "Or was I only dreaming I heard shots." He patted at a yawn.

"Some gents got careless with their lead," Reese said.

The lame man came hobbling toward him. And the sharp deep-sunk eyes scoured him.

"This is a dangerous town, I think," he murmured.

"It can be," Reese fenced. "Especially for somebody who has a man trail me—

as you did today."

The cripple neither denied it nor looked chagrined at being caught.

"That's right, I did," he said frankly. "I thought you were one of the bunch who held up the stage I was on last month. Now, though, I can see you were not." His eyes bit into Reese, mocking. "Well, I must go down and see if that buyer for my outfit has arrived yet."

"Where are you located?" the still suspicious Reese asked casually.

"A half-day's ride up the creek to the north."

"What brand?"

The lame man smiled. "You wouldn't know anything about it, feller. It's a sheep outfit." He laughed with a soft slippery sound and headed down the stairs.

Reese got his hat, went out and found Hank, and they headed down the street in the purple shadow of the big bluff. On a side street they found the neat white cottage where Louise Tasker's aunt and uncle lived. Auburn-haired Louise herself answered Reese's knock. She had herself under perfect emotional control, save for the jerky nervous movements of her hands as she smoothed her apron.

Reese introduced himself and Hank, showing her his badge. He explained that they were here to try to solve the rustling-in-reverse, which had cropped up in the Basin, and also to make an effort to save her father if they could unearth evidence in his favor. Her eyes lighted up. She invited them into the modest but attractively furnished living room with its neat print curtains and offered them chairs. Her eyes never left Reese's face in her tense eagerness.

"Do you think you *can* save my father?" she burst out earnestly.

"Twenty-four hours isn't a very long time, Miss Tasker. We'll do everything we can, though. We haven't much to work on and—"

"Do you believe he's innocent?"

"I do."

"Why?"

Reese suddenly admired this girl for more than her looks. She was no simpering, milk-and-honey petticoat job. She had an inner strength, a fighting spirit. And she didn't want soft words to gloss over the harsh truths. She wanted facts. Reese smiled at her and asked if they could smoke.

"Of course."

She came over to hold a match for him when Reese got the quirly in his mouth. Hank Ball hurriedly started to build a tube of Durham himself.

"Miss Louise," Reese asked then, "your father came back to the ranch after the shooting, did he?"

She nodded. "Yes. He came home and told me what had happened. He ate something, then rode into town to report to Sheriff Wilson, claiming he had been shot at first. But that vicious Rankin from the Running L had already seen the sheriff. Dad was put under arrest and held in jail right then."

Reese started to his feet. "He rode in and gave himself up?"

That was all the proof he needed. No guilty man would be likely to do that.

"Yes," she said simply. "He—"

The door of a side room was flung open. Mike Canron, blue eyes flaming with anger, leaped into the living room.

"Don't talk to that man, Louise!" he cried hotly. "He's tricking you—he's a fraud. He may claim to work for the Cattlemen's Protective, but he's siding the men who want to hang Jim! I know!"

"Friend," Reese said coolly, "you shouldn't smoke that kind of stuff. It'll drive you loco sooner or later."

Canron glared back at the calm field chief.

"Louise," he repeated, "these men are lying! They're against your father."

SWIFTLY he told her how Reese had jumped a gun in his back when he and Pancho had been preparing to break up the hanging and get Tasker away. Louise began to look suspicious.

Reese nodded. "That's right—I did that. Because, Canron, you and your friends would have been gunned down

in your tracks at the first move." He explained then about the Vigilantes being ready and watching.

Canron's jaw sagged. "I didn't know that!"

"You owe Mr. Reese an apology," Louise said.

"Never mind that." Reese turned back to her. "Was there ever any trouble between your father and Solo John Cain? Were they enemies?"

Louise Tasker shook her head. "Nobody really knows Mr. Cain well enough to like or dislike him or to have trouble with him. He's a hermit."

"Do you know of any enemies your father did have?"

She frowned. "No-o. Not really. He and Matt Lever had a run-in two years ago. It was over a fence line after Cimarron Creek flooded over and washed out fences. They wrangled and started law suits. Then one night here in town they flipped a coin to decide the matter. Matt Lever won. The two never spoke after that. But there was no more trouble."

"A lot of folks in town," Canron put in, "are saying that Jim Tasker was trying to get back at Lever and—"

A sudden frantic pounding on the front door interrupted him. A man outside in the dimming day called:

"Mike, are you in there? Mike! Mike, it's important—things are bad. Mike!"

Canron hustled over to the door and swung it open.

"Gabe, what's the matter?" he asked his bald-as-an-egg old cowhand.

The old man mopped sweat off his forehead with a bandanna, pushing his way in. "Mike," he said, "Eddie came in from riding fence line up there by the Devil's Elbow." He paused to catch his breath.

"Well, Gabe?"

"Runnin' L stuff is on your land, Mike. Penned up in a clearing in that strip of woodland there. Just like it happened to Jim Tasker, Mike. Eddie said even some of the brands had been fresh blotted. He said they was about fifty head, and Mike—"

Mike Canron paled around the mouth, eyes squeezing up. He muttered a curse and looked at old Gabe again.

"Well, you ran them off our land back onto the Runnin' L, of course," he asked.

Gabe shook his head. Eddie, he said, had been afraid to go back to the spot. He had caught the glint of a rifle barrel in the hands of some hidden watcher. So Gabe had hightailed into town to find out what to do.

Mike Canron decided immediately. He swung back, kissed Louise quickly, and grabbed up his hat.

"I've got to get out there pronto, honey. Soon's I get 'em swung off my land, I'll hit back for town to be here in the mornin' when—" He couldn't finish.

Reese stepped forward. "Mind if we tag along with you, me and my saddle pard, Hank, Canron? Might be able to pick up some hint about these peculiar goings-on here."

The two locked eyes. Then the Irishman put a hand on Steve Reese's arm. "I'd sure be danged glad to have you, Reese. There may be some trouble, of course, 'less'n Eddie was seein' things."

"Poking our noses into trouble happens to be our business in the CPA," Reese said. "Let's get riding."

But he paused long enough to take Louise Tasker's hand and thank her. And to promise to do what he could for her father. The girl's fingers pressed his warmly.

He stopped off at the hotel to leave a note for Dusty, telling him where they were headed. He put it under the pillow in his room, as had been agreed upon. Then he and Hank Ball rode out over the rail tracks and turned south with Mike Canron and old Gabe. The cowhand had procured a fresh cayuse at the livery barn.

Little time was wasted with words as they pushed along the stage trail, then cut off that to the cart track leading to Canron's place. The black overcast had dispersed and a lumpy globe of moon was waxing over the ridges in the east.

When they pulled up for a breather and to water their ponies at a small

spring, Reese said, making it half a question:

"This friend of yours, Pancho Smith—"

Canron cut his eyes at him, then grinned. "You CPA gents sure curry-comb up information fast, don't you? Pancho's one grand coot, Reese. He's keeping an all-night watch with Harris and some others in town. Maybe one thing you didn't hear—that some of the tough element in Twin Forks are sayin' the devil with waiting for the scaffold. So-o."

They pushed on again.

CHAPTER V

Rustling in Reverse

IT WAS some hours later when the four riders swung into the ranch yard of Canron's place. They gulped some grub and java and prepared to head for the Devil's Elbow. Canron was all for taking Eddie and Ben Lewis, his other hand with them, but Reese vetoed that.

"Don't leave your place unprotected. Those cows could be just a decoy. There are things like fire, you know."

Young Canron got it, jaw clamping at the thought. He left the two men behind when they rode on into the southeast toward the spot called Devil's Elbow on Canron's land. Now the moon was like a great disc of cheese set on the blue-black tablecloth of the sky over the ridges. There were no clouds to mar the heavens. And the full golden glow of the moon hung over the range, glimmering and rich. Reese didn't like it too much. Made it too easy for anybody to spot them from a distance.

They came to the big jutting hogback that spurred off from the eastern ridges to end up snub-nosed on the open range, the Devil's Elbow. From the end of it,

DUSTY TRAIL

a big tongue of wooded land fanned out. It lay in a slight depression, shadowed by the grim-looking Elbow. Just beyond it was the fence line of the southern boundary of the Stirrup C range. A coyote howled from down that way.

Canron called back softly and led them into the dried-up course of a creek that ran at right angles to their course and up behind the spur of ridge. There was a high swell in the prairie just beyond it. Between that and the creek banks, they were cut off from sight of anybody in the wooded strip.

They got in behind the Elbow, left the creek bed, and swung into the stand of trees. All of them had their Colts out as they pushed in through the woods, following a narrow deer run through the undergrowth. Then they came to the clearing where the Running L cattle were penned. They were in a makeshift corral of brush strung through lengths of rawhide running from tree to tree. Some of the cows shifted and milled about nervously at their approach. Reese

took command then.

"Canron, you and Gabe work these cows out of here. Get 'em through the fence and off your land—pronto. Keep your eyes peeled."

"And you?" Canron asked, a little piqued at taking orders. After all, this was his land.

"Hank and me'll be scouting around, ready to cover you if some of those coyotes are around watching," Reese said. "And I've got a hunch they will be . . . All right, Hank."

Walking his mustang he led the way down toward the end of the spit of woodland.

Where the trees thinned, they slid from saddle and left their horses ground-anchored. They took their Winchesters from the saddle-boots.

Out beyond the trees were clumps of sage and scattered boulders down toward the barbed wire of the fence. Just beyond that, on the other side, was a low hill, heavily underbrushed. From behind them came the low calls and sounds made by Canron and Gabe working the herd loose to swing them out of the woods.

Hank said softly, as they worked out from clump to clump of sagebrush, bent low:

"Doc, I never heard of coyotes smoking quirlies. And somebody up on that hill just forgot and uncupped his dewclaw over one for a moment."

Reese nodded, dropping to a knee behind a hummock as he lifted a hand in the sign to halt. Hank hunkered down behind a boulder a few yards away. There was the crackle of underbrush as the small herd began to move out of the woods, the drum of hoofs as Canron's and Gabe's ponies cut back and forth to keep the stuff together and pointed for the fence.

Soon, the lead cows appeared far down to the right, moving at a slow run, lowing as they came into the moonlight. Reese levered a shell into the firing chamber of his rifle. He heard Hank doing the same. Then Mike Canron himself came into sight, beating with his sombrero at some of the animals on the outside flank that were trying to cut away from the bunch.

Muzzle flame, followed by the report of the gun that had made it, licked out from the undergrowth up there on the hill outside the fence. There were two more gun explosions. A man up there reared from the brush and yelled something. Then several riders came over the crest, spurring down the side of the slope. It was what Reese had feared, but expected—a trap, an ambush.

Calmly he squeezed the trigger of his Winchester. The *spang-g* of it rolled across the night. One of the marauders jerked up stiff-legged in the stirrups and clutched at a bullet-gashed shoulder.

Reese's weapon spoke again. And so did Hank Ball's. Over on the right, but out in the open, Canron and Gabe were both firing with short-guns. Another of the charging riders grabbed at his hat as a slug passed through the crown. He reined around hurriedly. But the ambushers still hadn't spotted the two CPA men who were firing from cover and ahead of the herd.

The gunmen came on toward the fence, with some others bursting out of the brush and running down the hill after them. One of the men afoot, a little fellow in a checkered shirt and levis, got to the fence with a pair of wire cutters. He snapped the top strand, then the second one.

Reese steadied his rifle again as a barrage of lead stormed from the other side of the fence straight at the herd, Mike Canron and Gabe. Those raiders still didn't realize that Reese and Hank were working from off on the flank of the herd. Reese's weapon barked. He just missed his target, the crouched figure with the cutters. But a big man just behind him was lifted off his feet, smashed backward. He hit the ground like a sack, his chest split wide open by the Winchester slug.

That shot, however, showed the position of Reese and Hank. One of the attackers yelled, pointing at the spot where the two CPA men were hidden. In that

same moment the little bunch of frightened cattle started to stampede. Two steers had been slain, and two others were running around blindly because of the pain of wounds. Then with a great lowing, the click of entangling horns, and the rumble of hoofs, the herd began to beat northward. They drove by, somewhat strung out, between Reese and Hank and the raiders beyond the fence.

But as the stampeding herd pounded for the fence the raiders were whipped. There was no further attempt to cut that last strand of fire and come through at Mike Canron. Instead, they were beating it back up the little hill, both the mounted men and those afoot.

Reese called to Hank and they ran back through the sage for their ponies. But by the time the bunch of cows, tails flying, had passed, there was no sign of anybody on the hill at all.

Reese reached the place in the fence where the wires had been cut just as Mike Canron spurred up. Both dismounted and stepped over the lowest strand to take a look at the dead man.

"The jasper in the checkered shirt," Canron said, "the little feller that was cuttin' the wires, and hightailed—he's Rankin of Lever's Running L, the one who testified against Jim Tasker at the trial today. The one who practically put the noose around Jim's neck, Reese."

"Uh-huh." The CPA field chief rolled the dead man, a big-boned rangy figure, over on his back. He had a huge hook nose, and a cast in one of his staring, glassy eyes.

"Know him, Mike?" asked Reese.

Canron shook his head slowly. "Can't say I do, Reese. He ain't one of Lever's cowhands—at least, not one of his regular ones. Maybe Matt Lever is importing trigger slammers." He brandished a fist. "By grab, I bet that's it! He's looking for trouble, the polecat! He's practically smashed Jim Tasker—less'n we can save him somehow. Jim's place could be bought up cheap at foreclosure if he gets strung up. And now Lever is trying to bust me! He—" His voice shook with emotion.

Reese dropped a hand on his shoulder. "Easy, Mike, easy. We don't know anything for certain yet. . . . This Rankin, how long has he been on Matt Lever's payroll?"

"He came into the Basin a couple weeks back, roughly." Mike Canron answered after estimating a moment. "New man."

It didn't take Steve Reese more than a few seconds to calculate his course of action.

"All right," he told Canron. "You better round up that Running L stuff and try again to get them off your land."

He noted the bullet hole in the fabric of Mike's shirt sleeve. This time, the shooting had been for keeps. It had not been like that lead thrown at Dusty Trail in the hotel hallway. Still, Reese figured there was a hookup between these raiders and the men who had tried to put the fear of hot lead in CPA hearts back in town.

"Hank," Reese ordered, "you stay here with Canron and Gabe. Some of that bunch might swing back for another play. Me, I'm going to try to trail them down." He swung back into saddle.

Hank's face fell. "Maybe you ought to have me along, Doc. There was more 'n a handful of 'em. And they're professional gun passers, I'll swear. Anyhow, I'm gettin' rusty. I ain't seen no real action for—"

Reese waved him back with a brief smile. "Stick with Mike, here, Hank. You might get all the action you can use, mixed up with some hot lead, before this thing is finished." He rode off on his rangy mustang, swung around one end of the low hill to avoid running into a possible ambush at the top of it. He had a hunch a heap of things might be solved if he could catch that little Rankin and make him wag his tongue.

IT WASN'T hard for him to pick up the fleeing raiders on the open range in the luminous moonlight. All of them were mounted now, were pushing southwest across the grazing land, bunched up, and had dropped to a steady lope.

"Somebody wants to get certain parties on this range embroiled," Steve Reese muttered, giving vent to his thoughts as he rode. "Wants them at each other's throats. I don't think it's this Lever's game. But Solo John Cain . . ."

He made up a two-pronged plan. He wanted to grab off Rankin and make him talk, tell the truth about that gunfight at the fence where the killing for which Jim Tasker had been convicted had occurred. And he wanted to get in with this raider bunch and find out who was behind them.

He scowled up at that all-revealing moon. Because of it, he was constantly in danger of being spotted, didn't dare get too close to his quarry. He kept to the hollows until they had dropped over a swell ahead, often slipping out of the kak to peer cautiously over a rise to wait until they rode out of sight again. As they put miles behind them they seemed to be cocksure they were not being followed.

When the stars began to dim they had dropped into a little ravine.

Out of the saddle again, Reese waited at the lip of the near side of the ravine, in the brush, until they had topped the far side and moved on. They were silhouetted in the graying night beneath the low-hanging moon, and suddenly Reese saw that something was wrong. He saw what it was. There were eight riders now, and before there had been nine!

One had dropped off somewhere.

They rode on, and when the moon had become a paling disc in the sky, they followed a trail around a knoll. When Steve Reese edged his mustang around the knoll, he saw that the trail forked on the other side, one branch leading due westward, dropping down into a wooded bosky. He saw the bunch traveling ahead on the southwestward track, pushing into rough country. A hundred yards on he swung his pony over near the brush beside the track as those ahead topped a sharp rise. And now they were only six!

It was puzzling.

CHAPTER VI

Owlhoot Cave

THE path the raiders were following dipped down into a great chaparral jungle as a pink border on the eastern horizon presaged daybreak. The black stalks rose as high as the mustang on either side of the animal path through it. Reese, keeping steadily after the depleted bunch, passed a cross path. Then the outlaws went up a hill out of the jungle. And there were only four of them!

The trail turned into a cart track that went into a wooded cut. Reese rode around a bend without first scouting it—and almost into them. He drew back quickly, without being seen. The quartet had halted. And beyond them, facing them on the track, in their saddles, and covering them with drawn guns, were four other men.

"What in tarnation are you rannihans doin' on Umbrella land?" one of them challenged loudly.

So the four facing the raiders were Umbrella cowhands, belonging to Solo John Cain's spread!

A big man of the raider party, huge in the saddle, gave out with a deep laugh.

"Haw-haw! The Umbrella outfit, huh? Never heard of it. We're lost, me and my cowhands." He slid a hand into a coat pocket.

"Reckon, then," the leader of the Umbrella cowhands said curtly, "it might be a good idee for you to get better acquainted with our outfit. Now, just hoist them dewclaws steady-like and easy. We'll take a little pasear over to the ranch and see what the boss has to say. You might be some of those gun hands who been slapping cattle all around this range, so—"

The next move happened in a flash,

even as Steve Reese was trying to plan his own move. One of the lobo bunch, sidling his pony, cut his eyes to the rear, sighting Reese in the shadow of the trees. Simultaneously, the big lobo who had slid a hand into the side pocket of his coat, began to trigger. He had a snub-nosed .32 in that pocket, and he was shooting right through the cloth.

HANK BALL

Reese saw one of the Umbrella men sag over his saddle horn, hit in the body. He struggled to swing his cayuse away. Another crack of that gun which had caught the cowhands completely by surprise and the other lobos were hauling irons. Another Umbrella man bellowed an oath as a slug ripped the flesh of his shooting arm. Then they had whipped their ponies around and were hightailing it out of there. The big boss outlaw's guffaws rang after them. And Reese, forced to switch plans with split-second speed, made his move.

"Those cussed Umbrella cow nurses!" he yelled as he threw home the spur steel to his horse. Yanking a .38, he came hurtling forward, shouting more epithets at the fleeing Umbrella men. He rode right by the outlaws and pulled the cayuse to a sliding stop several yards beyond them. Then he despatched several shots, high, after the retreating riders. He turned back, still mouthing angry oaths.

"Don't have no love for them Umbrella scissor-bills, huh, feller?" the big lobo said as he rode back. "Neither have we, but we better haul tail outa here. Might be more of 'em scouting around. Come along, mister."

He took the lead with his horse. And a few hundred yards on, he suddenly turned west up the side of the little cut, coming out into a stand of yellow pine. Daylight had come, with the birds chirping around them, a gray cold daybreak. And Steve Reese found himself inside a circle of the four in a little clearing. But he was congratulating himself. He had as good as said, convincingly, to those men that he was outside the law. He had sided them. This was his chance to get on the inside—he hoped.

"Who are you, pilgrim?" the big man asked. "And why did you buy chips on our side, huh?"

Reese shrugged. "Riding under the handle of Reeder—now. Good as any."

That drew a chuckle from the big man. Reese turned his head slowly, sidling the mustang half around to take in the others. His hopes sank. Rankin of the checkered shirt, the cowhand on Matt Lever's spread, was not among those present.

"Realized those gophers were Umbrella men," he growled. "And I hate the breed!"

The big man hee-hawed again. "Uh-huh." His massive shoulders shook under the white leather vest he wore over a soiled sweat-stained shirt. He had a five-day beard stubble below big brown eyes as soft as a puppy's. His gray sombrero sat on the back of his head. Everything about him bespoke an easy con-

fidence. "Hate 'em, huh? They do something to you, Reeder?"

"Few years back," Reese said, staring down at his saddle-horn with a scowl, as if recalling the incident. "They think they own this dang Basin."

"Where you headed now, Reeder? Huh?"

Reese shrugged. "Ain't got no particular plans. I . . . Shucks, don't know why I'm wagging my jaw to you gents. I don't know who you are. Might be siding some of them danged badge packers and—"

THAT made the big man guffaw some more. Life seemed to be one big joke to him.

"Haw! That's a good one. Reeder, some of us have answered the owlhoot more'n a few times."

Reese looked unimpressed. "Well, reckon I better keep pushing this horseflesh along. Got a hunch there're a couple Gunstock County John Laws cluttering up my back trail. *Adios,* gents, and—"

"Wait!" The outlaw boss threw his horse over in front of Reese's, impressed by this jasper who seemed so danged independent. He pushed out a huge hand. "My handle is Gans, Trigger Gans. And more 'n a few lawmen would like to slap me and my friends behind bars. Listen, Reeder. We got a nice litle hideout back up here, a place them law coyotes'll never find." He was scouring Reese with the big brown eyes. And it was plain he was thinking of more than just giving him a hole to hide in. "Why don't you come on in and catch some shut-eye and some grub?"

Reese knuckled a jaw as if thinking deeply. Finally he nodded.

"All right, Gans."

Reese knew he was taking a long-shot gamble. But here was a chance to get on the inside, to learn much, to see, especially, if this "Trigger" Gans was hooked up with Solo John Cain. It was a slim, thin chance to save Jim Tasker, but the only one he had.

Gans nodded, chuckled some more as he swung his big bay in a turn around to the north. They rode back in the direction from which they had come, paralleling their former course along the cart track. They were looping back. It was a smart trick.

As he rode, Reese was repeatedly aware of the gaze of the outlaw they called Si on him. Si was a squat, dour hombre. A shock of stiff black hair crowded down on a low strip of forehead. Black bars of brows grew like encroaching brush over his dull eyes. He had the guarded look of a man whom life had made habitually suspicious.

When they came to the shallow feeder creek rushing downhill and paused to let the ponies drink, Si eased his animal over beside Reese's. From under his coat he pulled out a sack of "makin's" and offered it to Reese wordlessly. Reese knew it was just an excuse to study him at close hand, but he acted as if unaware of it and accepted the sack of Bull.

He was just tilting tobacco out onto the slip of paper when he saw an envelope protruding from Si's inner pocket. In producing the sack of Bull, he had unwittingly jerked the envelope half out. And on an upper corner of it was printed the return address

John Cain,
Ungala Basin

Over that was the Umbrella brand mark.

Si had opened his mouth to speak when Gans came splashing over on his bay. Si promptly fell silent. They pushed upstream in the creek with water purling about the ponies' legs. The creek ran into a notch between two sharp-sided hills. The banks reared high on both sides now, almost cutting off daylight. There was a sharp bend ahead, and Reese saw a man edge out from a clump of saplings on a narrow shelf of rock beside the water, his rifle at ready.

"Hey, Tim, it's Trigger and the boys!" Gans called.

"Howdy," said the man called Tim, lowering his gun. "We beat you in." That indicated he had been in the shoot-

ing ruckus at the Stirrup C fence line.

Trigger led the way up opposite the ledge with the saplings. There was a faint path in the dimness of the foliage, leading beneath an overhanging slab of rock. Gans dropped from the kak; Reese followed him. Gans seemed to be walking right at solid stone. Then he stooped, and Reese saw him enter the mouth of a large cave. It was a perfect hideout off the trackless water, with that stand of saplings masking the entrance.

Reese felt a chill creep down his backbone. It would be a tough place for a man to fight his way out of, too, if he were exposed. But it was all important for him to chance it, for he had stumbled on the one lead to anything that might save Jim Tasker's neck. He had it figured out now, about that fight tonight at the fence line. They'd had it planned that if they could cut down young Mike Canron, it could be twisted to look as if Lever had come upon more of his stolen cattle, and had gunned Canron. That, of course would have bred more trouble.

A few yards inside the cave entrance, a tunnel twisted sharply to the left. Following the tunnel for a short distance, firelight from a coal-oil torch stuck in a crevice in the wall revealed a fair-sized roughly oval chamber in the rock. Two men seated on boxes greeted Gans. Neither of them was Rankin, of the Running L.

"This here is Reeder," Gans introduced Steve Reese. "An owlhooter. Slams a real fast trigger . . . Bring out the jug, Dan."

PROMPTLY a jug of red-eye was produced and passed around. Gans licked his lips and got a stub of cigar lighted up. Si had built up the fire and already had a rich-smelling pot of stew bubbling. Then another member of the outfit arrived, an undersized man with a body like a twisted piece of wire and eyes like flint. Two more arrived just as the jug was making another round.

"We sure run into some trouble out there at that fence line," the man with the flinty eyes said. "Sure was tough, losin' Thom."

Another pair of men, tall, gaunt fellows who obviously were brothers, came in.

Reese got it then. The members of the outlaw bunch, one or two at a time, had dropped off, splitting up along the trail, to confuse pursuit. He still waited for Rankin to appear. But Trigger Gans dashed his hopes in that direction when he said:

"Well, we're all here now. Let's work that forty-rod around again."

Rankin was not going to appear. Gans took a double slug, then passed the jug to Reese.

"Could make you a little proposition, Reeder," he said insinuatingly.

"What's the game?" Reese asked.

"Well, we sort of shift cow critters from place to place. Sounds locoed, I know. But we get paid well for it. Can't tell you no more, though, till I talk to the big boss, the feller behind all this—with the *dinero.*"

He turned away and devoted himself to the tin plate of grub Si had passed him.

Reese got a plate and proceeded to dig in as the others were doing. Si was a mighty good cookee. Reese had finished and was just lighting up a quirly when something against the back wall of the cave caught his eye. It was a cane, a heavy, gnarled cane, the double of the one he had seen that sad-faced cripple carrying in town. He had been fairly certain before, but now he *knew* that that man had a hand in this deal somewhere.

He pulled his eyes away from the cane quickly, glanced around. And the strangely pale eyes of the stocky, square-built Dan were locked on him. Gans started to speak again.

"Only thing a bunch like us got to worry about is some dirty badge packer sneaking in and pertending he's an owlhooter. Now—"

The stocky Dan leaped up with a crazy light in his eyes. He stabbed out an arm at Reese.

"And I think we got one of them

polecats right here now!" he cried in a tight voice. "That Reeder there, I can smell something like skunk 'bout him! I'm callin' you, mister!" His voice trembled like an over-tight musical string. "Get on your hind legs and I'll bat the ears off'n you and make you admit you're a dirty John Law!"

He was already shrugging out of a worn black coat.

"Reeder," Gans said, "it's one of the laws of our bunch. Any one of us has the right to accuse any new feller that shows up."

Reese glided to his feet. He saw Dan unbuckling his shell belt. Reese knew that hesitation now could be an admission of guilt. It was a ticklish moment.

"I shore have seen him afore!" Dan said, and spat.

CHAPTER VII

The Test

STEVE REESE stripped off the crisscrossing shell belts with his black-butted .38s. A man took them. Other outlaws kicked the boxes back out of the way. Then, with a snort, Dan rushed him, arms thrashing windmill fashion—a typical barroom brawler, all fury and no science.

A fist struck Reese's cheek and some of the owlhoots yipped delightedly. But Reese, a trained boxer, had ridden with the blow. He ripped home a couple of lightning-fast jabs, and set Dan back on his heels. Dan lashed blindly at thin air. Reese smashed a hook to the man's midsection, then lashed a right to the jaw. He missed the button as Dan wobbled. But two of the man's teeth flew out. He was slammed back against the wall, sank to his knees.

Reese had no intention of jumping on him when he was down in the typical no-holds-barred style. Anyway he knew he could take him easily, almost any time he wanted to now. But somebody jumped in from behind and grabbed one of his arms, half twisting him around off balance. Then Gans himself had leaped in to put a big hand against Reese's chest.

"Let him get up, Reeder," he ordered, grinning.

Dan did clamber up slowly, spitting blood and cursing. He came in cautiously, head tucked behind crossed forearms. And then he lashed out with a kick to Reese's middle. The speedy Reese leaped back and clear, though, and caught the swinging boot behind the heel. All right, if the little snake wanted to play that way.

A sharp blow hit him from behind, at the base of the brain, half stunning him. Another of the bunch thrust a foot between Reese's legs. Tripped, he had to release Dan's boot as he crashed down himself. And Dan landed on him like a wildcat, sputtering between his broken teeth.

He slammed his hands into Reese's face mercilessly, rammed a knee into the CPA field chief's abdomen, then tried to gouge for an eye with a dirty thumb. But Steve Reese was as hard as a stove-dried boot, always in perfect condition. He twisted out from under and got to his feet. And then somebody, one of Dan's friends, let fly with an unseen blow from the side. The heavy seal ring on the man's hand gashed open Reese's forehead. Blood poured over his eyes, blinding him. And Dan's fists played a tattoo on his face.

"Wait!" roared Trigger Gans. "Give Reeder a fair chance! Two-three of you 'gainst one ain't fair!"

"Stand back, you dang sidewinders!"

That was Si. He jumped between Reese and Dan with a dipper of water. He splashed it in Reese's face as he kept Dan from getting at him.

"Next one of you who plays it dirty has to deal with me!" Si promised grimly.

Reese, his vision cleared, leaned back against the cave wall a moment. He saw Dan charging him again, heard his

panted, "Yuh dirty badge-packer, why don't you 'fess up?" Reese did measure him with a long left, but there was no power in his blows any more.

Dan almost crippled him with a savage kick to the left shin that practically paralyzed that leg. Dan's fists were like sledge-hammers in Reese's face. He was getting a fair deal now, but it was too late. He began to sink.

Then the coolness of the cave floor was against his face. Somebody worked whisky between his lips.

"Well, Dan," he heard Trigger Gans bark, "I hope you're satisfied now, by grab! No man who was a lawman spy could take a beatin' like that without spittin' it out. . . ."

It was afternoon in Twin Forks as Dusty Trail ambled down the main street, following the limping man with the cane, and his blue-shirted companion. Dusty had learned that the crippled man was named Strang.

Down by the tracks, the northbound train hooted as it came down the grade toward the depot. The two men ahead of Dusty, who had not taken their ponies from the livery barn, hurried on, with Strang half-hopping along like a big bird. They reached the station just as the train pulled in—a baggage car and one passenger coach. From a clump of brush a little down from the station, Dusty watched as the two men boarded the coach.

The station agent handed the conductor some orders. The locomotive hooted twice, wheezed asthmatically. Its driving rods grunted and ground. The train pulled slowly away from town, headed northward, away from the Ungala Basin, too.

Dusty had not forgotten Doc's orders to stick to this Strang and watch his every move. He slipped out from the brush, meaning to board the open rear

[*Turn page*]

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

"HE'S GOT LADDIE BOY in check all right, but not Dry Scalp. My, what unkempt hair! Looks like a mane . . . and I'll bet it's as hard to comb. Loose dandruff, too. He needs 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic!"

Hair looks better... scalp feels better... when you check Dry Scalp

IT'S GREAT! Try it! See what a big difference 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic makes in the good looks of your hair. Just a few drops daily check loose dandruff and those other annoying signs of Dry Scalp . . . spruce up your hair quickly and effectively. Contains no alcohol or other drying ingredients.

Vaseline HAIR TONIC
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Listen to DR. CHRISTIAN, starring JEAN HERSHOLT, on CBS Wednesday nights.

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platform of the passenger car. A slug hissed by his head.

Amazed, Dusty pulled up in the gravel of the roadbed. He had seen the flash of the gun from just inside the half-open back door of the coach. Dusty lunged forward again. A bullet tore through the crown of his hat, and behind that second flash he saw the sad face of the crippled Strang. It would be suicide to try to swing onto those car steps now.

The train picked up speed, and it was too late even to try. . . .

IT WAS some time in the afternoon when Steve Reese awoke in the outlaw cave. The slightest move brought twinges of pain to his battered frame. His face felt as big as a melon and as ripped up as if he had tried to dive through a few dozen barbed wire fences. Out of one eye, for the other was swollen shut, he saw Gans getting up and stretching prodigiously. In the middle of the cave a man powdered with trail dust—one Reese had not seen before—stood holding an envelope. The guard from outside was behind him with a drawn gun.

"John said you'd have to hurry and hit the saddle right off," the new arrival was saying.

Gans cursed. "Awright. That John, he sets on his britches all day, then he expects a gent to jump outa his boots every time he spits." He went over and took the envelope, slit it open, and read the message slowly. "Tarnation! Now it's a human critter we gotta rustle. Awright . . . Hey, you gophers, wake up! We gotta ride on some business."

The owlhoots began to crawl out of their blankets. Reese propped himself on an elbow, knuckled gently at his unclosed eye. He worked his tongue around his lips and got the taste of dried blood. He pushed himself up, managed to stand for a moment, then almost pitched on his face. On his knees, he heard the messenger speaking.

"John, he said the best spot would be by that strip of timber on the stage road a few miles down from the Tasker place. She'll be coming home from town and—" The words faded in Reese's ears.

Then Si was beside him, propping a drink up to Reese's face. Reese swallowed a couple of times, wondering why this Si was so kind to him.

Reese seldom drank to any extent. But he had to get something to stiffen him up now. It was important that he be able to ride with them. He might meet their boss, this "John." And he had to be in on this new move, too, whatever it was.

Somebody had removed his boots, he discovered. Somehow he got them on though his head was swimming. He rose again and almost fell on his face once more.

"He-he," Gans laughed. "Reeder, you act like a feller with a skinful of red-eye." He came over and dropped a hand on Reese's shoulder. "You stay here, Reeder. This ain't much of a job. We just got to rope a filly. Won't take much trouble. You stay and—"

Gans' words reached Reese only dimly. He shook his head.

"No, no. I can ride. If I'm one of the bunch, I gotta do my share, Trigger. I—"

"I said you stay here, mister." Trigger was smiling, but the shove he gave Steve Reese rapped his head against the cave wall. And the CPA man sank down on his blankets again. The others went out. He caught, faintly, the splash of their ponies as they moved out into the little creek.

After a while he came out of the fog in which he sat slumped against the wall. Movement brought on nausea. But he managed to crawl to the water bucket and douse his head into its contents. The first shock passed and he felt a little steadier, though his head ached like a boil.

"Guns, my guns," he heard himself muttering.

He reared up and got his eyes focused. And luck was with him. He spotted the guns on a small natural-made shelf in the rock wall on his left. As he buckled on the .38s, his thought processes were growing clearer. He worked on his som-

brero gingerly over his battered head.

"Jim Tasker," he whispered. "Tomorrow—" And a chill as sharp as a plunge into a mountain pool knifed through him. Some instinct told him he had to get out, away, get riding. "But the guard out there—"

He headed into the tunnel toward the cave mouth, then turned back to pick up the jug of red-eye. He carried it to the cave mouth, put it down, and drew one of the .38s. On hands and knees, hidden in the dimness, he could see the guard squatted on a boulder out by the edge of the saplings. It was Dan.

Reese drew in his breath in anticipation. Then he edged from the cave into the saplings near the entrance. He picked up a few small stones and sent them spattering into the cave mouth. Dan lifted his sagging head and came off the boulder fast, twisting around.

"Who's there?" he called, whipping up a carbine. When he got no answer he started slowly toward the cave mouth. "Who's in there?" he called again. At a half-crouch he passed the spot in the saplings where Reese was hidden.

Even though Steve Reese was weak, he clapped his gun down across the side of Dan's head with gusto. He delivered another crack as the man sank in his tracks without ever glimpsing him.

It was hard for Reese to drag the outlaw into the cave mouth. He had taken a bad beating in that one-sided fight. But he dominated his flesh and bone by sheer will power, got Dan inside the cave entrance. Then he trussed the unconscious man's legs with his gun-belt, and lashed his hands behind him with his neckerchief. He doused Dan's head and shirt with some of the red-eye from the jug so he would smell like a whisky mill when he was found. For Dan was not going to recover for quite a spell from those raps Steve Reese had given him. Reese swayed with dizziness from the effort.

THEN, after more effort he found himself in the saddle of his own cayuse, taken from among the saplings, and riding downstream. He came to the place where they had cut into the stream that day at sunrise, turned out. He kept thinking of the name "John" that the messenger had used. It sure seemed as if Solo John Cain held cards in this cold-decking game. He moved over the course they had taken coming in heading down for that cart track. The sun beating down on him made his head throb as if a pendulum swung inside it.

He drew up to let the horse drink at a seep spring. Dismounting, he got down on his knees and splashed some of the cold water into his face again and again. Then it all came back to him—and the meaning of it—how Trigger Gans had said, when he had pushed him back down onto the blanket, how they only had to get hold of a filly. And the messenger saying how "John" said the best place to strike from would be the piece of timber fringing the stage road a few miles down from the Tasker outfit.

Just as he was following the path through that chaparral jungle, things got pieced together in his mind and made sense. Gans had said they were out to rope a filly. That meant a girl. And then the messenger mentioning the Tasker place, the strip of timber down from it, and how "she'll be coming home from town." Reese knew then that they meant to kidnap Louise Tasker! The reason for it he hadn't figured yet.

He got onto a track running eastward across the swells of the prairie. With his photographic memory, plus what he recalled from a map of the section he had studied on his way to Twin Forks, he knew he was headed in the general direction of the Tasker *rancho*. He was getting weaker, had to grasp at the saddle-horn at times. But he kept going till he came to that stage trail, turned to his right, and northward along it. He cudgeled his brain, trying to remember the exact location of that stand of timber on the stage road. As he recalled, there were two such spots. Then from the top of a swell in the range he spotted one of them ahead.

Immediately he cut off the road to

quarter around and come up behind it. He thought he caught the drum of hoofs once, but with his head ringing constantly he couldn't be sure. He got in among the trees. And then he heard the voices.

"Now just stand steady, folks, and nobody'll get hurt." There came a deep chuckle, Trigger Gans' guffaw. "We're just aimin' to take the little lady off a ways for a little parley. Nothing to worry about if you behave yourselfs. If you don't—" Again came Gans' laugh.

"Danged if you're a-goin' to get away with that, you sidewinder!" That was Dusty's voice, truculent.

"Well, if you're asking for a window in your skull—" another of the Gans bunch suggested.

Then Reese had edged his pony forward so he could see them through the foliage. He picked out Gans at once despite the neckerchief mask he wore, as did the others of the outfit. And they had Louise Tasker and the swarthy Pancho Smith and Dusty covered with their guns, having jumped them from the trees. Reese's deductions had been correct.

CHAPTER VIII

A Snatch That Failed

DRAWING in a deep breath to steady himself, Steve Reese levered up the black-butted .38s and cut loose. He had to stampede that outlaw bunch pronto or the game would be lost. His guns crackled out slugs. He aimed the first for Gans, missed in his wobbly brain-fogged condition. But one shell caught one of the tall, gaunt brothers in the arm and he screeched like a crazed hootowl.

Dusty, as tough and quick as a mountain lion, had slid out of the saddle on the far side of his pony and started to cut loose from behind the animal's rump. Another Gans man grabbed at his cheek as a bullet sliced the flesh.

Behind the screen of trees, Reese bolted his pony ten yards or so along, then triggered again, to make it lock as if more than one man was there. That did it. Gans bawled something, and the whole pack of them kicked in spur rowels. They hit the breeze north up the road and around the bend, panicked by the sudden switch in the situation. Dusty leaped into the kak and took off after them as he saw his boss, Reese, ride into view. When he got around the bend, he saw them hightailing across the open range. They would not be returning soon.

Reese tried to smile at the pale girl as he rode from the timber strip. Then a welling tide of blackness swept over him as his overtaxed body surrendered, now that the danger was past. He felt himself slipping from the kak.

When he opened his eyes again, Louise was kneeling beside him, oblivious of the dust, cradling his head. Pancho Smith was wiping his face with a bandanna dipped in water from a canteen. And Dusty Trail stood there fiercely chewing on a stogie stub. Reese tried to sit up.

"Dusty," he said, seeking to make his voice stern, "I thought I told you to stick with that lame jasper in town like a shadow."

"Don't get all het up now, Doc," Dusty said gently. "I sure tried to. But—" Then he told of trying to board the train after he had seen the lame man and Blue Shirt head out of town. "His name, the lame one, is Strang, Doc. He cut loose at me." He pointed to the bullet-hole in the crown of his hat.

Reese frowned with the effort of concentration. That didn't seem to tally up, the limping Strang pulling stakes. Then he turned his eyes to Louise.

"Your father?" he asked grimly.

She smiled. "Don't worry. At a special hearing this morning, the judge granted a stay of execution of one week. I'll tell

you about it later."

Reese felt the black tide creeping over his senses again. But even as he faded out, he saw now why they had wanted to snatch the girl.

He was dimly aware of being lifted aboard his horse, of Dusty riding at his stirrup to steady him in the saddle. Then the next thing of which he was aware was that he was stretched on a sofa in the living room of the Tasker ranchhouse. Louise had finished cleansing the gash on his head as well as the cut on his forehead. She was bandaging them now. Then Pancho appeared with a cup of ill-smelling herb tea.

"It is good I stopped at Tomaso's store in town and got some fresh herbs today. This is a prescription of my Mexican grandmother, senor. Drink it, please."

Reese downed one cup of the syrupy bitter brew, half choking on it. Pancho insisted he take another cup. As he downed that, Reese felt the nerves in his body quiet. The terrible pounding inside his head died down, even when he sat up. His mind lost that fuzzy fog.

"Sure is miracle juice, Pancho," he said.

The Mexican-American grinned. "*Bueno,* senor. But somebody, they have given you a terrible beating, my friend."

Dusty stepped in belligerently. "Doc, tell me who did it! Just tell me! They must've been a pack for no one jasper could do that to you. But you tell me so I can hunt 'em down and rawhide 'em till—"

"Later, Dusty," Reese told his loyal aide. He looked at Louise. "Tell me about it, ma'am."

The auburn-haired girl smiled. "He's safe for another week, Steve. It was like a gift from the gods. When court opened this morning. H. T. Youngman, the famous lawyer from St. Louis, appeared as counsel for my dad. I—I could hardly believe it."

Reese's eyes widened, too. He knew of Youngman, rated the smartest criminal lawyer that side of the Mississippi. And his fees were supposed to be fantastic.

LOUISE went on to tell more. Youngman, she said, had demanded a reopening of the case. He said the trial had been a mockery of justice with the key witness against Tasker, Rankin, a stranger who had been in the country only a few weeks.

"Then Mr. Youngman told the judge," she rushed on, the words tumbling from her lips in her relief, "that the defense shortly would have new evidence to present, that they had a clue to the whereabouts of Bennis, the Running L cowhand who had been present at the shooting and disappeared almost immediately afterward. He said he wanted to present him as a witness as soon as he could produce him. Oh, it was wonderful!" She clasped one of Reese's hands in her excitement. "The judge didn't know what to do—Mr. Youngman was so learned. Then the judge said he'd be passing back through Twin Forks in a week. He said he would consider any new evidence at that time, and granted a stay of execution of sentence."

"That's fine, Louise."

But Reese was baffled anew in this strange situation. He asked her if she had spoken to H. T. Youngman afterward. She had. But he had been curt, rude to her, stalking across to the hotel where he had taken a room. He had refused to answer any questions except to say that he had been hired by telegraph to hurry here and take the case. And he simply brushed by her when she tried to find out who had hired him and paid his retainer. At the jail, when she had talked to her father, he could not explain Youngman's appearance.

Reese stood up, checking over the known pieces of this puzzle. Strang's departure from town puzzled him. But he was sure he understood the reason for the attempt to kidnap Louise. That move had been made when "John" learned about the stay of execution. If they had the girl as a hostage, perhaps they believed they could force a confession from Jim Tasker, or use it as a club over Mike Canron's head.

"You ain't told us your story, Doc," Dusty put in.

Reese told them then of how he had trailed the Gans bunch, of being taken to their hideout after he had apparently sided them against the Umbrella hands. Then he described the beating when some of Dan's friends had ganged up on him in the fight. His mouth hardened at the thought of that. If he hadn't been so brutally punished, he could have ridden along with the bunch when they tried to kidnap Louise. As it was, it had been a close call. If he had arrived on the scene a couple of minutes later, it would have been too late to have checkmated them.

"Awright, Doc!" Dusty broke in again. "Tell me how to get to that dang cave and smoke out them polecats, and—"

Reese shook his head. For one thing, he knew Dusty wouldn't have a chance of getting in at them.

"No, Dusty," he refused. "That Gans bunch are just hired gunhands. We've got to find out who's behind them. Besides, I plan to use them yet, maybe to lead me to their boss. We've got to keep our heads."

He fired up a quirly as he tried to get the pattern of the thing. Everything seemed to point to Solo John Cain who had refused to cooperate with him. Cain's writing to CPA headquarters about the trouble here could be a perfect blind, a cover-up. Reese eliminated Matt Lever from the picture even though Rankin, one of his hands, had ridden with the Gans bunch. Lever had no motive. It wouldn't be logical for him to stop his own cattle from being returned to his land.

"Senor Reese," Pancho said, "what do we do now? When they try to capture the senorita here, that is very bad. *Verdad!*"

Reese turned to Dusty, smiling a little.

"Dusty," he said, "you're going to Cain's Umbrella outfit and try to get yourself a job."

"What, Doc?" the paunchy operative protested. "You mean a bunkhouse hand? Shucks, Doc, they'd expect me to work, wouldn't they?"

Reese smiled, despite his swollen and cut mouth. Every time he moved his face, even to talk, there was a twinge of pain here, an ache there. Each time it reminded him of Trigger Gans. Before the last card was played in this devil's jackpot, he intended to have a little private session with the easy-laughing Gans. And when it was concluded, Mr. Trigger Gans would find nothing in the situation that was humorous.

"Far from it," Reese muttered, but aloud he said, "Yep, Dusty."

He saw Louise Tasker looking over her shoulder in surprise as she prepared to light the lamp with the big roses painted on its globe over on the table.

"It ought to be easy for you," Reese went on. "Cain seems to have a liking for ex-jailbirds on his pay-roll."

"Gosh, Doc, I never was jailed for nothing in my life!"

"But you've been in jail, Dusty. Remember when we were trying to solve that Banning case? And we arranged for you to enter the State Prison as a convicted killer so you could get information from Banning's saddle pard who was doing time there."

"Sure, and I lost nine pounds, the grub was so terrible. Why I was a plumb shadow of myself when I come out."

REESE chuckled, as well as the others.

"But that fits you for this assignment, Dusty," he insisted. "You can describe the place, describe Warden McElroy. Mention the names of other prisoners you met."

"Uh-huh." Dusty growled. "And how is it I always get these cut-and-dried jobs a feller could handle from a hammock? Left behind in town to ride herd on that gent, Strang, who's sorta fussy about who rides the same train with him. And all the while the fun is happening out here on the range. Now—up to Cain's place! Shucks, Doc, nothing's going to happen up—"

"Don't be too sure about that, Dusty," Reese broke in. "He might be the king-

pin of this whole setup. I want you to keep an eye on Cain and everything that happens there. I'm asking you as a personal favor to me, Dusty." He added that last diplomatically.

"Oh, well, since you put it that way, Doc." Dusty waggled the cigar stub across his lips. "By the way, just 'fore I pulled stakes outa town I picked up some talk that was travelin' around. Ever'body said it was just a rumor, that they didn't know where it came from."

"Yes, Dusty?"

"Well, the talk is that they's a rustling combine out here in the Basin, made up of Jim Tasker and his friends, other ranchers who've been finding the goin' tough since the drop in the beef market. The story is that Mike Canron is one of 'em. And another is a rancher named Harris."

Reese had that one tabbed right off, as he nodded. Whoever was behind this satanic game, concocting this brew of trouble, had started that story. He heard Louise gasp as she turned up the lamp. Its glow flooded out in a growing cone about the rug.

It was then, looking past her, that Steve Reese became aware for the first time that another man was in the room. He was a white-haired man, seated in a rocker diagonally across in the far corner of the living room. There was a blanket over his knees. His face, beneath snowy white hair, was as pale as a sheet, wasted. Reese, meeting the man's dark, hot eyes, knew at once that he was an invalid. The man just sat staring, unmoving, making no sign of greeting. Louise followed Reese's stare, then turned back to him.

"That's Uncle Tom, my father's brother, Mr. Reese," she said.

She explained, in a low voice, that he was completely paralyzed on the left side, and partially on the right, from the waist up. It had affected his neck and throat cords as well, so he couldn't speak. It was the result of a gunfight, of a bullet that had lodged against his spine, affecting certain nerves. He could hear, though. "Come over and meet him," she said.

CHAPTER IX

Gunfight Victim

LOUISE took Reese over with her to the poor devil who had begun to rock gently. She introduced them. Reese bent down and gripped the right hand Tom Tasker lifted feebly in a palsied motion.

"Howdy, Tom Tasker," he said heartily. "We're going to try to do everything possible to get your brother, Jim, off free. I'm convinced he's innocent."

Tom Tasker's eyes glowed with warmth. He did manage just the shadow of a smile with one corner of his mouth. Then it was pitiful as he worked his jaw in an attempt to get out a word or two—and in vain.

"Mr. Reese," Louise said, "we've got a week now before Dad—" She put the back of a hand against her forehead, swayed slightly. She was under a terrific strain. "Do you think there's a chance?"

Steve Reese didn't believe in giving people false hopes, and he had sized this auburn-haired girl up as courageous.

"A week is some kind of a break, anyhow," he said. "And I know things now I didn't know before. But—well, Miss Louise, we've got to face it. Your father had no real enemies? Can you say there was no man, even perhaps from years back, who held a grudge against him? A bitter grudge, let us say. Tell me if you can think of anyone—anything."

She knuckled her forehead as she concentrated, trying to bring any forgotten word or action to mind, trying to recollect.

"Were you thinking of anyone in particular, Mr. Reese?" she finally asked.

"I don't know—exactly," he said thoughtfully. "Yesterday, when they were preparing to carry out the sentence of the court, before the gale crashed the tree, there was one spectator who seemed to be enjoying it."

He described the lame, sad-faced man who had sat his saddle watching the necktie party with gloating.

"Strang's his name," he told her.

But it was plain that neither the description nor the name meant anything to the girl. Then Dusty Trail plucked at Reese's sleeve.

"Hey! Look!" Dusty nodded toward the invalid.

Tom Tasker was rocking back and forth agitatedly, his eyes almost bugging from his head with the intensity of an attempt to convey a message. His lips worked faintly, flaccidly. But no sound issued from them. Reese got it instantly.

"Miss Louise," he said sharply, "your uncle knows something—something important. He's trying to tell us. He knows—"

It was ghastly. The paralyzed figure whipped the rocker faster. Once he managed to incline his head slightly in a gesture that plainly said, "Yes." A sweat film came over his face as he strove to talk.

"You know of some enemy, Tom?" Reese asked.

Fascinated, he watched the man rock faster, driving the chair with the trunk of his body, with the right or only partially paralyzed side of it. And he made the forward motion of the chair emphasized so that it was like a nod, a "yes." The customarily steel-nerved Reese found himself breathing hard and spasmodically.

There was no question but that Tom Tasker had information to impart, all-important information—if he only could. This, perhaps, could break the case, but it seemed like a forlorn possibility. The paralytic did get one short sound, something like a sob, past his vocal cords. Then he sagged over sideward in the rocker, exhausted to the point of collapse by the terrific effort he had exerted to make words. Louise made a choking sound and grabbed one of Reese's arms, trembling.

But Steve Reese hadn't given up yet. His trap-fast mind was working madly, streaking fast. He turned to pull open a drawer of the long table in the middle of the room. What he wanted wasn't there. But in the second one it was—paper, pen and ink, and a stub of pencil. He took the pencil, a sheet of paper, then seized a book atop the table. Placing the paper on it, he put the book on Tom Tasker's blanket-swathed legs, then worked the pencil between the first and second fingers of the man's palsied right hand.

Tom lifted his eyes to Reese, gratitude brimming in them that somebody understood. Then he kept the sunken eyes down to the paper. And the struggle began.

The pencil slipped from his fingers. But Reese deftly snagged it and replaced it. The shaking hand, as white as flour, fluttered over the paper, made a few marks like hen scratches. Then Tom Tasker made a crude symbol that might have been an "S." Reese nodded encouragingly.

"Yes—ess," he said softly. "What next?"

Tom Tasker's hand trembled. Desperately he jabbed at the sheet and the pencil point snapped off. Louise produced a new pencil, wiped his damp face with a towel. Shaking like an aspen leaf, his hand hovered over the paper again. With agonizing slowness he started to fashion another letter. Reese heard the hard, sharp breathing around him, sleeved at the perspiration on his own forehead. Beyond any doubt, the half paralyzed man had valuable information. He knew something that might be the key to the whole situation.

REESE watched the pencil hesitate, halt. Then it wavered in a crazy line down from the half-formed second letter. Tom Tasker moved it up again, started a fresh attempt at the letter. Reese peered. It might have been an

"I" or an incomplete "t."

And then the old man's palsied hand jerked in a spasm, went flat and limp. The pencil rolled off onto the blanket. His head fell back and silent tears of frustration leaked from his eyes. They pulled from right to left and back again to tell them he couldn't do it.

The failure, the defeat, was all the more infuriating because the rest of them were helpless to do anything about it. But Reese, despite the blow it was to him and his hopes, remembered how the old man must feel. He patted his shoulder gently and managed to raise a smile on his own face.

"Don't worry, Mr. Tasker," he said. "Maybe tomorrow, the next time, you'll be able to help us."

"Oh, I thought—"

Louise Tasker could say no more as she leaned her head on Reese's chest, her fingers digging into his shoulders.

"What's the matter here?"

Mike Canron, who had entered unnoticed in the tension of those last few moments, stalked into the living room as he pulled off his hat. He scowled at Reese who was trying to comfort the girl. There was animosity in his eyes, pure blind jealousy.

"Some gents, it seems," he growled, "spend their time sparking the womenfolk while men they're supposed to be protecting get whipsawed by the law."

Reese explained what had happened, how they had seemed to be on the threshold of unraveling the whole mess. Then, as he came nearer, young Mike saw the terrible condition of Reese's face.

"Great glory, man, what happened to you?" Mike Canron broke in.

"I didn't get it sparking the womenfolks," Reese told him crisply. "The initiation rites into Trigger Gans' outfit are a little rough. Trigger Gans is the one who hit you and the rest of us the other night at the fence line."

"Then let's go get the polecat!" Canron cried impetuously. "Louise'll let us have some of Jim's men and—"

Reese shook his head as he sat down on a corner of the table, still weak in the legs.

"You couldn't dig them out of that hole-in-the wall they have with a small army," he declared. "You'd have to starve 'em out, Mike. And in trying that you'd only warn the man who hires Gans and his bunch."

"All right, all right. We know who that is—Matt Lever! Wasn't Rankin, one of his cowhands, with this Gans bunch last night at the fence fight? Let's hit his outfit!"

Reese smiled wearily. "And start a full-fledged range feud, and maybe bring the law down atop of you with a—well, a killer charge, too. No, Mike, you're way off. I don't think Lever is in on the deal."

"But Rankin!"

"Rankin was a witness to the shooting Jim was charged with, the key witness at Jim's trial, Mike. Is Lever a

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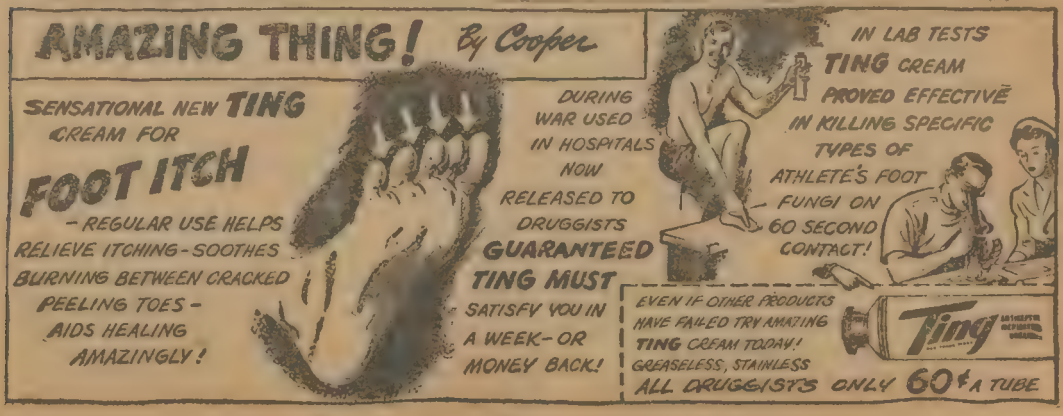
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fool? Would he have that man on his pay-roll riding with hired lobos as his representative?" Reese answered his own question. "Hardly. For if Rankin should be captured, it would destroy the value of his testimony. So I don't think Matt Lever is responsible for any of this stuff."

"Mr. Reese is right, Mike," Louise put in as the young rancher stood scratching his head in puzzlement.

"But why would they try to kidnap Louise?" he protested. "Jim was convicted, due to—" He broke off, tonguing his lips quickly.

"Sure, they figure they've got the deadwood on Jim Tasker," Reese said quietly, but frankly. "This time, they were trying to strike at you—through Louise."

"How, Reese?"

"If the hombre behind this whole thing—this John—had her hidden somewhere, he could about order you what to do, couldn't he?" He saw Mike Canron gasp. "He could even send you word to ride into his camp unarmed, on the threat of harming her—and you'd come, wouldn't you?"

"Great heavens, above, yes!" Mike said hoarsely. "But I can't figure it. I've never had any enemies. I've never made any trouble for anybody. My dad was a deputy sheriff for a few years, but after he died I turned down that job when it was offered to me." He knuckled his forehead. "I can't figure it," he repeated.

"It narrows down to this gent called 'John'," Reese said, "and he may be Solo John Cain. Or to the lame man with the cane—Strang."

"But he left town, Doc," Dusty put in.

"Maybe." Reese didn't explain that. It was just a hunch, anyway. "John Cain is the one with the motive." He went on, as though talking to himself: "If he's one of these land-hungry cattle kings, trouble among the smaller ranchers could be turned to his advantage. This Strang could be just a two-bit owlhooter who's lying low and is suspicious—"

Something drew his eyes to the half-paralyzed Tom Tasker in the rocker. The helpless invalid sat there, head a little outthrust in concentration as he listened, eyes bulging with his vain desire to speak. But it was useless, as he knew, as they all knew. . . .

EARLY the next morning, after spending the night at the Tasker ranch, Steve Reese was back in Twin Forks despite his swollen face and his skull that felt as if it were filled with rocks. Pancho Smith, who had stayed at the Tasker place, too, insisted on accompanying him. Dusty had already gone on to Solo John Cain's outfit to try and get that job.

In town, Reese's first visit was to the jail for a few words with Wilson, the sheriff. When he had identified himself by producing his CPA shield, he told the sheriff he wanted some information about Rankin, the Running L cowhand who had been the main witness at Jim Tasker's trial. Wilson bristled, wanted to know if Reese was trying to fight this case, against the law.

"I'm interested in finding what's behind this haywire rustling that's going on in the Basin," Reese answered coolly. "What do you know about Rankin's past?"

Wilson hemmed and hawed a little. Said that men came and went up and down the trail in cowmen's country. And that it didn't mean a man was a liar or a lobo just because he hadn't been born and weaned on the spot where he might be found. Then he did admit that, under questioning, Rankin had said he had last worked in Lincoln Flats, New Mexico, where his brother-in-law lived.

"We checked that with the post office here," Wilson continud. "He had received mail from there, all right."

But that was the extent of the information the sheriff could give. Still, it was a help for Reese's purpose.

He left with Pancho, and went down to the telegraph office. There he dispatched a wire to Colonel Beauvine, his superior at the home office in Austin. Reese asked for information regarding Strang, describing him. He asked for all

information regarding John Cain, the cow king. Finally, he requested any data they had on a cowhand known as Rankin, describing him in detail and adding that he had lived in Lincoln, New Mexico. He asked the operator to rush the message through.

He was just stepping out the door to rejoin Pancho Smith when he spotted a vaguely familiar figure across the street, a tall, slab-bodied man in a blue shirt and shotgun pants. Reese got a glimpse of a thin line of black mustache. He was almost dead certain this was the man who had trailed Hank and himself that first day, right after they had seen Strang outside the Chinese eating place.

Then people on the sidewalk blotted out the man. Reese hurried across but saw no sign of him.

CHAPTER X

Death in the Trees

WHILE Reese and Pancho ate breakfast, Pancho tried to find out what Reese planned. Reese only shrugged.

"What do you think their next move will be?" the Mexican-American persisted. "How can a man make *dinero* by running cattle from one man's land onto land belonging to another hombre!"

"That's what makes me think there's a vengeance motive behind this, Pancho," the CPA man admitted. "Somebody who has a grudge against Jim Tasker and Mike Canron and Harris, too, and is trying to settle it. Looks to me as if it's somebody who wants the law to do their killing. I don't know But they are being balked. The appearance of that lawyer, Youngman, was a setback. We whipped 'em when they tried to ambush Mike Canron. We licked 'em again when they tried to get Louise. Now, if we only can anticipate their next move—"

He was leading the way out of the restaurant as he spoke. Next door was the barber shop where tobacco was sold as a side line. On display in the window, Reese saw some of those stogies Dusty Trail smoked, recognized them by the gaudy red-and-green band. He went in and bought half a dozen, slipping them into his pocket—a surprise for Dusty.

As he was leaving he heard the northbound train whistle down at the depot, as it departed. That reminded Reese of his second reason for coming to town. He and Pancho mounted and rode down to the station near the outskirts of the cowtown.

"You missed her," the station agent on the platform cackled at them with a triumphant note. "Last one north today. . . . Hey, Pancho, long time no see. Give my regards to Tom Tasker when you go back, will you? Ain't heard how he's doing since—"

Through the open window came the agitated clatter of his telegraph key and he hurried inside.

"Tom Tasker worked here before he got paralyzed in that gunfight," Pancho said to the field chief in explanation.

Reese nodded as he rode along beside the railroad roadbed northward in the direction the train had taken. They followed the rails into a cut and around the wooded bend. Then the tracks started up a long grade that rose sharply at first. Reese glanced back. They were out of sight of the station now, and the timber also cut them off from view of the town.

"The train has just started," he figured aloud. "Wouldn't have gathered speed yet. This climb would keep it slowed down to about a walk, too."

He rode the rangy mustang along slowly now, a hand resting on one of his black-butted .38s, eyes scouring the ground at either side of the tracks. Half a hundred yards on, he saw what he had hoped to see—boot prints in the clay beside the crushed stone of the roadbed. He was out of the saddle quickly.

The faint prints led toward the trees on the left, disappeared amidst them over

the mold underfoot. With Pancho Smith hard on his heels, Reese worked deeper into the woods on the hillside, coursing to right and left like a hound dog. In a small clearing, he found the hoofprints of three horses in the soft earth, three horses that had been waiting there.

"That's it," Reese said softly.

Pancho Smith was down on one knee, inspecting the ground closely. He picked up a stub of cold damp-browned cigarette.

"I would say, *amigo,*" he observed, "that there had been one man here waiting with the horses for some others to come—with two extra horses."

"That fits," Reese agreed. "That means Strang never really left town at all. He pretended to throw off Dusty whom he knew was watching him. That was why he took a shot at Dusty when my aide tried to catch the train he was on. He couldn't let Dusty aboard to see him drop off as the train slowly puffed up the grade here. A man was waiting with horses. All three of them slipped back into town or somewhere to a hideout in the Basin."

Watching from the trees, and well-hidden from sight, Strang snarled in a low voice to Blue Shirt who sat his saddle at Strang's stirrup:

"That accursed Reese is too smart, George. He's wise. He's figured it out we only made a bluff at leaving town, and dropped off the train around the bend."

He rubbed the short beard he had let grow to hide his identity. He also wore spectacles for the same purpose. When he was mounted, his infirmity went unnoticed.

He had spotted Reese and Pancho in town, and he and the man in the blue shirt he called George—one of the outlaw band he had selected for his bodyguard, and to do his personal killing—had trailed them. Carefully they had followed down to the railroad, paralleling the CPA man's course along the tracks, then he and George had ridden back among the trees. Now, hidden a short distance away, they could see Reese and Pancho inspecting sign in the little clearing. Strang lowered himself from the saddle, pulling his cane from the boot. George dismounted also.

"It's got to be lead for Reese," Strang decided. "You can pick him off at this range, George. But—don't—miss!"

GEORGE pulled out an ivory-butted Colt, laid it over his left forearm as he crouched. Tense moments passed. Then George fired. But at the exact instant his gun crashed, Reese, in the clearing, had bent to take the quirly butt Pancho extended to him. The little Mexican-American started to rise. They heard his outcry.

"Sangre de Cristo!"

They saw him half-spin, buckling. Crimson leaked from a hole in the shoulder of his black coat. He had straightened just in time to catch in that shoulder the slug meant for Steve Reese's back.

Strang swore as he saw Reese whip out one of his black guns, wheeling.

"Get him now—get him now!" Strang commanded George, huskily.

George did trigger, but hurriedly. The slug sped high through the foliage. And then Reese triggered twice. George let out a howl as he was hit. And Reese was running toward the men hidden in the trees. He vanished in the thick growth himself, for a moment.

Strang pulled a gun from inside his coat, cursing George, but shrewd enough to stand some yards back from his gunman. Two more shots slammed out. George swayed forward, dropped to his knees, as blood poured from the side of his head. Strang thought fast. George was hit badly. And Strang, with his crippled leg, couldn't hoist him into the saddle. But if he left him here to be captured, perhaps he could be forced to talk.

Purposefully Strang strode forward, put his gun against George's back, and pulled the trigger. George went over like a pole-axed steer. Then Strang hobbled quickly back, dragged himself into the

kak, took the reins of George's pony, and threw home the spur steel. He got out of there fast.

Hearing the thud of departing horse hoofs, Steve Reese charged forward, discarding caution, heading for the spot where he had glimpsed a figure on the ground. He halted and peered around the side of a big moldy stump. It was the blue-shirted man on the ground, the same who had shadowed him and Hank in Twin Forks.

The fellow was down on his stomach, his head turned to one side beside a clawed-up hand. There was a blotch of blood on the side of his head where one of Reese's slugs had nicked the flesh. And there was a bloodstain on one leg of his shotgun pants from Reese's second shot, the one that had dropped him to his knees.

Reese took a quick look around, saw no one, but heard the hoofbeats still fading, then moved from cover. When he got closer, he saw the bullet-hole in the back of the man's shirt, smack between the shoulder-blades. There were powder burns around the hole, which meant that a companion had finished off this man at point-blank range. Reese's lips curled back from his teeth at the cold-blooded ruthlessness of it. This man had been gunned so he couldn't be captured and made to talk.

Reese thought of hustling back to his horse, trying to trail the other man, or men, but realized that would be useless. The escaping rider, or riders—he had heard at least two horses—would be back in Twin Forks, lost in the crowd, before he could close in.

He eyed the ground around the dead man. There were some odd shallow dents in the soft earth.

Reese knew then. The killer—killer of one of his own men—had been the sad-faced cripple with the cane. These dents in the ground clinched it. But still, Reese realized, he had no concrete evidence, no testimony of a witness to present to the law.

"Ah-h-h . . ."

That was a feeble gasp from the man whom Reese had thought already dead. His shoulders shifted slightly. His mouth worked, then his last words were gasped out:

"John, you—y-you said you'd hang ever' last one of 'em . . . John—"

The death rattle sounded in his throat.

Reese wondered again if "John" meant Solo John Cain. He wondered if this saintly faced lame man with the cane was on the cattle king's pay-roll, too. . . .

It was night, with the heavens a star-spangled blanket as Reese and Pancho rode back south on the range road. They had first ridden to town where Pancho had had the painful but not too serious flesh wound in his shoulder patched up by a sawbones. Then they had had to wait for several hours more, until evening, for the expected wire from Colonel Beauvine.

The information contained in the telegram had been somewhat disappointing. CPA headquarters had no record on Strang at all. On John Cain, Colonel Beauvine wired:

JOHN C ONCE SMALL TIME OWL-HOOTER. ACCIDENTALLY KILLED A MAN AND GAVE HIMSELF UP. SERVED TIME FOR IT. MODEL PRISONER. WENT STRAIGHT AFTER THAT. WOULD SWEAR JOHN C IS FOUR-SQUARE.

Referring to Rankin, the telegram read:

HAVE NO RECORD ON R. THERE WAS MAN NAMED RANSON ONE TIME WANTED BY LAW OFFICIALS IN LINCOLN FLATS, NEW MEXICO, FOR SHOOTING. LATER WITH POOLE RUSTLING RING BEFORE IT WAS SMASHED. OUR DESCRIPTION OF RANSON VAGUE.

Ranson could be Rankin all right. The sheriff said Rankin had received mail from Lincoln Flats. But there was no concrete proof he was Ranson. And it was a hard and fast rule of the CPA that an operative had to have irrefutable evidence before he struck.

AT THE end of their ride, Reese and Pancho swung into the ranch yard of the Tasker outfit. Lights still glowed from the windows though it was late.

And when they entered, Dusty Trail surprisingly appeared in the hallway just behind Louise Tasker. She asked at once if Reese had seen her father in jail. He shook his head.

"That wouldn't have been wise, Miss Louise," he told her. "It would have connected me with his case. But we did learn some things. That man, Strang, has chips in this game all right. He—"

Then the rotund Dusty swung around the auburn-haired girl.

"Doc, all perdition's about—pardon me, ma'am—but, Doc, they's going to be a heap big chunk of trouble. That's why I slipped away from Cain's place and hustled up here."

Reese had fired up a cigarette as they moved into the big living room.

"You got taken on there as a cowhand, Dusty?" he asked.

"It was as easy as spittin' in a creek," Dusty assured.

He told how he had ridden in, admitted he was an ex-convict and said he had heard the boss gave a break to former outlaws who were trying to go straight. One of the bunkhouse gang had remembered him from the State Prison. And when he had mentioned the name of Warden McElroy, Cain's *segundo,* a man called Blackwell, had been convinced. Dusty had been taken up to the main house to talk to Solo John Cain for a few minutes, then had been hired.

"But I'm afraid he's a bad 'un, after all, Doc," Dusty said, putting a match to one of his stogie stubs. "It's all right," he added defiantly. "Miss Louise said I could smoke—any time."

"Did she say any*thing,* Dusty?" Reese twitted him. He saw the bright-eyed Tom Tasker down in the corner in his rocker and threw him a salute. "Where's Mike Canron?" he asked.

"He went haywire when Dusty came in with his news," Louise put in. "I tried to get him to wait till you came. But he wouldn't."

Reese swung around to Dusty. Considering what he himself knew, he figured Dusty had been exaggerating.

"What was your news, Dusty?"

"Well, it looks like Cain is the bad apple in this barrel, Doc," Dusty told him. "He's goin' to hit Matt Lever's Runnin' L around dawn!"

"What?"

"Uh-huh. Feller rode in late this afternoon. He was one of the spread. When he swung up to the corral and dropped off, the gents all knew him. They called him 'Si,' like an old friend."

"Si," Reese said softly, thinking of the dark, low-browed outlaw at Trigger Gans' cave. "Go ahead, Dusty."

CHAPTER XI

Raid on the Running L

AS DUSTY reported it to Reese, this Si, it seemed, had gone right up to Solo John Cain's castlelike ranchhouse. Just a few minutes after that, Blackwell, the *segundo,* had ridden in and given Dusty some tally sheets to take up to the "Old Man," John Cain. Nobody had answered Dusty's knock on the door of the huge *hacienda,* so he had barged in. There was nobody in the huge oak-beamed living room. Dusty had gone down a side hall in the 'dobe castle and had heard voices from the other side of the door of Solo John's office. He had recognized Si's voice.

"What does Si look like, Dusty?" Reese put in.

Dusty told him. His description fitted perfectly the squat, dour man who was apparently one of Trigger Gans' bunch.

"It was him I heard doing most of the talking, Doc," Dusty went on. "He said they were going to slip in on Matt Lever about dawn and fix him. He—"

Reese, tensed, interrupted Dusty. "What were his exact words?"

"Why—uh—he said, this Si gent, he

said, 'We're going to slip in and hit Matt Lever about dawn, Boss.' That's what he said. Sounded like he was giving orders to the boss, Cain, himself."

"What did John Cain say?"

"He said, Doc, that he'd be there with his men at the Runnin' L come dawn. Then that housekeeper of Cain's came along and called him and I didn't hear any more."

A little later, he said, he had slipped out and ridden to the Tasker place, hoping to find Reese himself. But Doc had not been here, and Canron had gone haywire.

"You know how impetuous he is, Mr. Reese," Louise explained. "He went straight up in the air, said that he had smelled it all along that Solo John Cain was behind the whole thing! He insisted that Cain wanted the smaller ranchers at each other's throats so they would destroy each other, then Cain could pick up their outfits for a song." She shook her head. "There was no talking sense to Mike."

He had rushed out, with Hank Ball accompanying him. Hank had told Dusty he was going along, hoping to talk Canron into a calmer state. Canron had said he was going to Harris and to Dutchman Gainor to get help so he could go out there and cut down the Cain raiders when they struck Matt Lever's place.

"Mike was upset anyway," Louise added, her hands tight balls of fists as they rested on her black corded riding breeches. "That was because old Gabe, one of his cowhands, left early this morning to inspect fence, and hadn't returned. But his horse came in this afternoon with blood on its saddle."

A frown was on Reese's handsome face from the effort of fitting together these new facts. He realized there would be little sense in trying to pick up Canron on the open range, not knowing where he was going first. And the time element was important. Reese came to his decision quickly.

"Dusty," he ordered, "hightail it back to Cain's place. Give 'em some windy about how you happened to ride off, but get back there and ride out with them when they go to Matt Lever's outfit."

"What-t?" Dusty Trail almost swallowed his stogie. "By grab, Doc, I'd have to ride with a pack of polecats who're out to murder, most likely! Honest, Doc! What're you a-goin' to do?"

"You've been bleating away about wanting some action, Dusty. You might get it tonight. As for me, I'm heading for Lever's to try to stop that locoed Mike Canron from tangling with the Cain bunch and making a move he might regret forever . . . I reckon I could use a fresh pony, Miss Louise."

Dusty goggled at him. Louise looked puzzled, too. But when Reese glanced at Tom Tucker, the invalid's sunken eyes gleamed with approbation. . . .

A gusty wind bent the range grass flat in great swaths as Reese, with Pancho Smith, who, despite his bad shoulder, was riding with him to show him the route, neared the Running L. They were nearing the Basin rim, one edge of which projected up against the night sky. There was a lopsided moon that cast an unreal bluish glow over everything intermittently. Scudding black rags of clouds scrubbed its face at intervals, blocking out its effulgence.

"Rain, soon," Pancho remarked sniffing the wind.

There was a faint streak of grayish light on the eastern horizon as they moved up the side of a low, long hill with a windbreak of trees at the top. Then they were gazing down at the Running L ranch buildings, crouched in the darkness of the shadow formed by the other sharp side of the hill. Down beyond the little bluff a faint light glowed from the open doorway of the ranchhouse.

The moonlight heightened for a moment. In it, Steve Reese saw a figure standing in the doorway of the low adobe bunkhouse, facing inward. The wind whipped the trees in front of the ranchhouse. Figures seemed to be moving there. But nothing could be heard, no sound picked up, with those vagrant

gusts of wind that were lashing across the prairie.

THEN a man down before the house cupped a match to a quirly in his mouth. He threw the match away, still burning a couple of moments after it landed. And in its small glow Reese saw the white line of a rope dangling from a bough of one of those trees.

A hanging was in the making! The words of the dying Blue Shirt in the woods beside the railroad tracks came back to Reese like an echo:

"You said you'd hang every last one of 'em, John."

Reese shucked out one of his black-butted .38s just as Pancho plucked at his arm. "Over there—to the right, Reese," he breathed, as he pointed. "Riders—many men.

Reese looked and caught his breath. From a little behind the *rancho*, a shallow dry wash stretched up the range with cottonwoods fringing either side of it. Along the wash a band of horsemen were approaching, a large bunch. Too many to be Trigger Gans' band. That meant they were the Cain men.

And then, further off to the right of the wash, hidden from it and unaware of what was coming down it because of the string of cottonwoods, he sighted another group of riders. They were pushing at an angle toward the cut, obviously planning to drop into it and move up on Lever's place. And as a cloud film shifted off the moon, Steve Reese picked out Mike Canron at the head of that bunch. Canron had pulled off his sombrero for the moment as he twisted in the saddle to call to the half-dozen men behind him. When he and they dropped off the bank of the cut and ran into the Cain men, all perdition would break loose.

"We've got to head this off, Pancho! Come on!" Reese had almost to yell to make himself heard as the lusty rampaging wind ripped the words away from his very lips. He put spur steel to the mustang, pushing along on the top of the bluff overlooking the ranch buildings, through the trees. Pancho followed. Investigation of that rope and those vague shadows of figures under the trees before the house would have to wait.

When they reached the end of the hillside that shadowed the Running L and headed down it, the Cain outfit from the Umbrella spread was closer to the end of the wash. And Mike Canron's handful of men was nearing the cottonwoods on that side of it. Neither of the two groups, intent on the Lever ranch, were aware of the presence of Reese and Pancho Smith, nor of each other. It was eerie, that night that bore no sounds. For the blasts of gusty wind were like a quirt that lashed all sound away almost before it was created.

On the level ground, Reese and Pancho swung across a small shallow hollow with their ponies belly-deep in grama grass. Then Reese, in the lead, swung into the mouth of the little wash that had a hogleg crook just before it flattened out. He was just in time to see Canron's bunch dropping down on the side of the cut.

It all happened fast then. Mike Canron spotted the Cain men to his right, and let out a yell.

"There are the dirty doublecrossing snakes, gents Give it to 'em—all you got!"

Steve Reese shot around the bend of the wash, ahead of Canron and his men coming down the side. Reese fired into the air once to draw their attention, then pounded on to put himself between them and the Cain ex-jailbird cowhands. The Canron bunch couldn't throw down then without danger of hitting him. In front of him was Solo John Cain himself at the head of his pack, arm flung up to halt them. All had guns out, some of them had their rifles slipped from the saddle-boots. It was a tense moment.

"The raiders are at Lever's already!" Reese shouted against the wind as he wheeled his pony in a tight circle. "At the house!"

He saw Pancho spurring over to the

bewildered Mike, shouting, too.

"What's this, Reese?" Solo John Cain called, riding forward toward the CPA field chief. "You mean Gans is already at the Running L?"

At the moment, the wind shut off momentarily in the rising gray tide of day as if swallowed. And a piercing shriek, the cry of a woman in unutterable anguish, came across the night from the ranchhouse.

Reese wheeled his cayuse around and drove the animal recklessly toward the place. Behind him, Solo John Cain signaled to his outfit. As the still amazed Mike Canron stared, the Cain band rushed after Steve Reese to go into gun battle with Trigger Gans and his lobos.

Past some outbuildings of the Running L Reese went at headlong speed. Past another shed, then veering to ride around the corral. Over to the right was the low, silent bunkhouse, with no sign of Running L cowhands around. The moon glow came through clearly again, then Reese saw the man who was inside the doorway wheel, two Colts spiking from his hands—the squat Rankin, the double-crosser who worked for the Running L and rode with the Trigger Gans bunch.

RANKIN had been covering the cowhands inside the bunkhouse. He sighted Reese and opened up with his six-guns. But Reese had hauled his mustang to a sliding stop and Rankin had fired ahead of him.

Reese's first slug chopped a chunk from the door frame. His next got Rankin in one leg and knocked him down, out of the fight. Reese started on, hearing the yells of men inside the bunkhouse. There was another gun report. Reese shot a look back. Solo John Cain, astride a magnificent steel-gray stallion, and speeding after Reese, had fired at Rankin though the outlaw was down on his knees. Rankin tilted slowly forward, hand hooked over his chest.

There was no time to halt then. Reese slammed up along the side of the ranchhouse, around into the heavy shadows under the trees before it. He was bent low in the kak, guns cocked. The wind whirled dust into his eyes, half-blinding him. It also carried to his ears the drumming of hoofs of the horses ridden by Trigger Gans and his bunch.

"Hurry!" a woman's voice screamed. "Hurry—cut him down!"

Reese forced open his dust-filled eyes and saw her, a gaunt woman, her gray hair streaming down her back. She was on the porch steps, pointing off to the left. Matt Lever, hands lashed behind his back, his short black beard jerking slightly, was hanging there. *He* was at the end of that rope Reese had spotted from the hill!

Clawing out a Bowie knife, Reese swung over and hacked away at the manila hemp. Lever was still alive. His face was distorted and empurpled, his eyes bulging as he started to tumble earthward, but his neck had not been broken.

Cain and Mike Canron swung up beside Reese. The field chief was out of the saddle quickly and grabbing Lever around the upper legs to break his fall. The rope parted and there was a half-strangling sound from the rancher as he gulped for air when he went down. Then Reese was flinging on, his mustang shying away from a prone body in the ranch yard.

Soon it would be daylight. Reese was recalling how once before the Gans bunch had broken up and dropped off man by man when they headed for their hideout. If he could catch one of them and make him wag his jaw—

Then gunfire erupted at Reese from around the back corner of a small shed just ahead.

Reese sawed on the reins, swung the mustang sharply to the right to hit around the other corner of the shed, come to the other side. He dropped from saddle and lit running, doubled low in the underbrush. He was too late. The ambusher who had tried to gun him down had headed out, a-horse, from behind the shed, and was already up the

short rise out of the hollow on that side. He sidled his horse in the light of the moon, to take another shot at Reese.

And in that moment, Steve Reese saw the object that was protruding from the rifle-boot of the man's saddle. It was no rifle. It was a knobby dark cane. *Strang!*

Muzzle flame streaked toward Reese. He himself triggered once. He knew he had missed when Strang bolted his cayuse out of sight beyond the rise. Reese got back into saddle himself and drove up the rise. Ahead, Strang was hitting the breeze over the swells of the range to the southwest. Reese gave his cayuse a touch of spur steel, glad he had picked up a fresh horse at the Tasker place.

And then, as the gray light heightened from the east, the first wind-lashed wave of rain hit him squarely in the face. Strang was wiped from sight as if a curtain had been dropped between them.

CHAPTER XII

The Man in the Rocking Chair

FOR a couple of miles Reese pressed on. Then he knew it was no use, so he reined up, drenched. One minute he could see maybe twenty yards ahead, then would come a wind-hurled screen of rain and everything beyond arm's length was blanketed out in the gray haze of the new day. Even cold trailing would be impossible with the rain wiping out all tracks in seconds. Besides, Strang might have cut off from the main bunch at any point. Grim-faced, Steve turned back.

He came upon Pancho Smith and one of Harris' cowhands out in the rain. They dropped down into the hollow near the house and dismounted under the umbrella of the big trees.

At the ranchhouse Mike Canron came down the porch steps as Reese reined in. Mike said they had Matt Lever inside. He would be all right, except for a severe rope burn about his neck.

"Where's Cain?" Reese asked.

Canron gave him a glowering look. "Pulled out—him and his bunch—after they went through the motions of giving chase to the raiders. What did you expect 'em to do, Reese?" His voice had a ragged, harsh edge.

"What do you mean, Mike?"

"Are you blind, Steve Reese? I was right all the time! Those raiders—Trigger Gans and his gunslicks—they're hired by Cain."

Reese kept calm. "But Cain sloped in here with his outfit to help."

"To make it look good!" Canron burst out hotly. "It would be a mighty fine alibi for Cain, wouldn't it? He shows up after Lever has been strung up. So the law would never think of accusing him."

"That's what it looks like to me, Doc," Hank Ball said as he and Dusty Trail joined the group under the dripping trees.

"Reese," Mike Canron said impatiently, "you said Trigger Gans got a message from a man named John when you were out at the cave hideout, didn't you? *John* Cain, wouldn't it be? He could afford to hire a lobo bunch to work where his own ex-convicts couldn't!" Mike, raking his curly black hair with excited fingers, was practically breathing fire.

Reese questioned Dusty some more. But the paunchy aide could tell him little. He had got back to Cain's place just as they were riding out to come here, and had swung in with the bunch. Nobody had told him what the plans were.

"And we found Old Gabe," Canron went on bitterly. "Here! A-laying over there on the ground, shot in the back. But he'd been gunned some time ago, then brought here. That would of hooked me into it, if I hadn't come here, would've put a noose around my neck just like they've practically got one around Jim Tasker's! Here!"

He turned and led the way up onto the

porch, pulled back a blanket over a still figure there.

It was Old Gabe. One look and Steve Reese could see by the waxy sunken features that the old cowhand had been dead for hours. Mike Canron was right about that. Gabe's corpse had evidently been brought here and left as a plant. Reese began to doubt his own conclusions. The very fact that Cain *had* pulled out so quickly after Matt Lever's life had been saved was beginning to look suspicious. . . .

They rode back across the range in the wet early day, talking little. Canron was definitely belligerent, figuring he had been right and Steve Reese wrong all the time. They had Old Gabe's body with them, tied over a saddle. When they came to a fork in the cart track, with a curt wave Canron and his men turned off toward his place. Reese, with Dusty and Hank and Pancho Smith, kept on toward the Tasker place.

There was one piece missing in this puzzle, one detail about which Reese wasn't sure. He went back over the events of the day before, seeking some clue to it. Strang was the unknown quantity. Reese knew he was in on the deal, but it was possible he could be the go-between for Solo John Cain with Trigger Gans.

He thought of the meager information the sheriff had been able to give him. Thought of the wire from Colonel Beauvine.

None of it gave him a lead.

Before pulling out from the Running L, they had all gone down to the bunkhouse and looked at the body of Rankin. John Cain's shot had split Rankin's chest. That had been a tough break for the CPA man. A wounded Rankin could have been made to talk.

Reese's thoughts again went back to the day before, and to how he and Pancho had ridden down past the depot, and to the station agent who had asked about Tom Tasker. Pancho had said that Tom, Jim Tasker's brother, had worked at the station until he had been wounded.

"Just how was Tom Tasker shot?" Reese asked Pancho. "I know it was in a gunfight, but what were the details?"

THE little Mexican-American lifted his head. He was weak now, in bad shape after all that riding, with his injured shoulder. Yet he had insisted on coming along.

"Tom?" he said. "Oh, that was when some lobos tried to hold up a train just as it pulled in with a mail car bringing *dinero* for the bank. They cornered Tom in his office, wounded him with that bullet that lodged against his spine."

"Yes?"

"Yes, senor. The outlaws escaped by the train they held up. But it did them no good. Even though wounded, Tom worked his telegraph key and flashed the warning up the line. He had sand in his craw, that Tom Tasker. He—"

Reese cut him off, flinging away his quirly. "You say he worked—he was the telegraph operator?"

"But, yes, of course."

Reese was thinking out loud. "Telegraph operator . . . He can't talk any more. And he's got something he wants to tell us—badly. Something important . . . Telegraph operator . . . But he can rock in his rocking chair. There *is* a way he can talk, by grab!"

"Do you feel all right, Doc?" Dusty asked, swinging over beside him. "That poor devil, how can he talk?"

"With the rocker—in Morse code, Dusty!"

Reese urged his mount into a gallop, hurrying to the Tasker place. In just a short while, ignoring his wet clothes, he sat astride a chair in the living room of the Tasker ranchhouse, facing old Tom Tasker. Reese had a pad propped on the back of the chair in front of him, a pencil ready. He spoke quickly yet clearly, eyes locked with those of the semi-paralyzed man.

Behind him, in a semi-circle, stood Dusty and Hank, with Louise at Reese's right hand. Pancho Smith was seated in a nearby chair.

"Mr. Tasker," Reese said, "I know there is something you want to say. And I've figured out a way for you to say it. No, not by trying to write," he added quickly as he saw the old man's eyes twist down discouragedly toward his right hand. "You were the telegraph operator at the station?"

Tom Tasker's eyes twitched up and down to say yes. Steve Reese went on as Louise half-turned away, shaking her head, convinced it wouldn't work. But Reese had caught the sudden gleam in Tom's look.

"As a telegrapher, you naturally know the Morse code. So do I." Reese leaned forward across the chair back intently. "So—we'll use it. Here's how, Tom. You can manage to rock the chair. All right. A short rock is a dot. A longer push, a longer rock, is a dash. Got it? Morse code."

The invalid's eyes almost leaped from his head with eagerness. His chest heaved with excitement. At last he saw a way to communicate with the world around him.

"I'll ask questions," Reese continued. "You'll spell out the answers, in Morse code, by rocking. I'll write it down." Reese paused to sleeve the sweat from his forehead. "Tom, when I asked Louise if your brother, Jim, had any enemies, you wanted to say something. You knew something. Did he?"

Tom Tasker's nostrils pinched as he drew in breath. Then he began to rock, slowly, calculatedly. There was a long rock. A short one followed.

"Dash," Reese said, as he marked it down. "A dot."

Tom Tasker made two more long slow rocks. Two more dashes. Reese nodded. "'Y,'" he said.

Tasker's eyes beamed. He made a quick rock. A dot. A pause. Then three quick rocks in succession.

"'E' and 'S,'" Steve Reese said. "You mean, yes? That's the Morse code."

The old man's face glowed. At last, thanks to Steve Reese, he could talk.

"Who is this man who was an enemy?" Reese said. He watched with bated breath. Tom Tucker worked the rocker deliberately.

"Three dots—'S,'" Reese said as he checked it. "If I'm wrong, Tom, stop rocking. . . . A dash—right? 'T.' A dot and a dash and a dot. 'R.' A dot and a dash. 'A.' A dash and a dot. Yes? That's—'N.' And—" he caught his breath—"a dash, a dot, a dot. That's a 'D.'" He had been expecting two dashes and a dot for a "G," making the name Strang. Instead it was Strand.

Yet Tom Tasker sat there beaming, tonguing his mouth slowly, obviously pleased with himself. Reese asked if he was wrong. And with the rocker, Tom Tasker spelled out, via Morse code, a dash and a dot, for an "N," then three dashes for an "O." No.

"Doc, have some of this," Dusty said. He handed Reese a cup of black coffee, laced with some red-eye.

REESE gulped without taking his eyes off the invalid. After that surprise, he didn't know what question to follow with. But he didn't need to put one. The rocker went into action again. Surely and calmly. It spelled out, in the Morse code:

T-h-e . . . m-a-n- . . . y-o-u . . . c-a-l-l . . . S-t-r-a-n-g . . . f-r-o-m . . . y-o-u-r . . . d-e-s-c-r-i-p-t-i-o-n . . . i-s . . . J-o-h-n . . . S-t-r-a-n-d . . . H-e . . . h-a-s . . . a . . . t-w-i-s-t-e-d . . . l-e-g . . . M-y . . . b-r-o-t-h-e-r . . . h-e-l-p-e-d . . . t-o . . . h-a-n-g . . . h-i-s . . . b-r-o-t-h-e-r . . . Je-t-h-r-o . . . S-t-r-a-n-g . . . s-w-o-re . . . t-h-e-n . . . t-h-a-t e-v-e-r-y . . . m-a-n . . . wh-o . . . h-e-l-p-e-d h-a-n-g . . . h-i-s . . . b-r-o-t-h-e-r . . . w-o-u-l-d d-i-e . . . a-t . . . t-h-e . . . e-n-d . . . o-f . . . a . . . r-o-p-e. . . .

Reese took another gulp of the java, watching the old invalid intently. This was the answer, the thing he had been looking for. And it fitted. The "John" that Trigger Gans had mentioned was now identified as "John Strang," one time Strand. Reese recalled too, what the dying Blue Shirt had muttered with his last breath: "You said you'd hang every last one of 'em, John. . . ." That clinched it.

Then Tom Tasker's rocker was creak-

ing again, giving out signals in the Morse code. And, slowly, laboriously, but steadily, he told the whole story, how Jethro Strand had been a ne'er-do-well, a saloon tough, up twice, once on charges of rustling, again accused of being a horsethief. But Twin Forks had been in the raw-wild stage then. There was little law. Then Jethro Strand had gone too far, one night stealing the sole horse of a hoeman whose wife was about to deliver a child. The hoeman had been planning to use his lone horse to get the doctor. The wife and child had both died, as a result. And the Ungala Basin had gone haywire, staged a terrific manhunt.

The rocker creaked faster. Dusty Trail had let his stogie go out and was wheezing with excitement as he realized the drama and tragedy in the story that was being revealed. Louise, on one side, and Hank Ball on the other, hung over Steve Reese's shoulder, as he jotted down the letters to make words from the code being sent out by the semi-paralyzed speechless man's rocker.

It went faster. Tom Tasker was getting new-found strength out of the fact he could talk to somebody. But Reese was an expert at the code. He got it.

CHAPTER XIII

Owlhoot Proposition

MIKE Canron's father, Tom Tasker told with his rocker, had been a deputy sheriff at the time Strang's brother got into such trouble, and the elder Canron had led one posse in the rundown of the horsethief. Jim Tasker had been a volunteer in that particular posse. So had Harris. Also, Matt Lever. And it was that posse that had captured Jethro Strand and strung him up on the spot.

"John Strand went so loco when they came back to town with the news that friends had to pin him down," Tom Tasker spelled out in the telegraphic system of dots and dashes with his rocker. It was then he had sworn to get the men who had strung up his brother, to hang them as they had hung Jethro.

"Strand is this man who now goes as Strang," Tom Tasker said with his rocker. "I am sure of that." He paused, tired.

Louise's hand unconsciously dug into Reese's shoulder. Hank Ball was breathing hard with repressed excitement.

"Doc—" he started.

And then Tom Tasker was talking with his rocker again as Steve Reese jotted it down in dots and dashes, then scribbled the words beneath the symbols. Tom Tasker's rocker said:

John Strand went away from here. . . . Word came back a few months later he was sentenced to die by hanging in Jackson Forks. But the rope parted when they were stringing him up. And you know frontier law about double jeopardy, Reese. . . . He got away alive. Went south of the Border. . . . Then a story came back that he had staked some prospector down in Necezari and that the man had made a silver strike. . . They said John Strand was rich. . . You should know the rest. . . It seems like Strand—Strang—is back. . . And is collecting his revenge. . . That is all. . . John Cain did a prison term once. . . But he is a good man.

His head sagged with the effort of what he had done.

Steve Reese knew that Strand, now riding under the name of John Strang, was back all right. And now he saw the motive behind the trouble in Ungala Basin.

"If there was only some way to find that cowboy, Bennis, the other witness to the shooting of which Dad is accused!" Louise said. She seemed unable to realize how the information Reese had obtained from her uncle could help.

Old Tom Tasker began to talk with the rocker again, once he had caught Steve Reese's attention. "O," he spelled out with three long rocks, three dashes. Then he went on, and the rocker said, in

the code only Reese among those present could understand:

Old Ben Bennis, young Ted Bennis' father, works for John Cain. Too old to ride the range now. So he just does od jobs around the place. That help, Reese?

Reese gave him a big grin and patted his shoulder.

"It does, Tom. You sure are doing as much as any of us on this job." He stood up quickly, resolution written on his face. "Bennis," he said thoughtfully, then added, as he hiked at his gun-belts, "There's only one way."

"What, Doc?" Dusty Trail wanted to know.

"I'll go back to the hole in the creek bank of the Trigger Gans bunch and talk them into taking me to the man who hires 'em—Strang."

"Holy Pete!" Hank burst out. "You can't do that, Doc! No! It's too dangerous."

"It's the only way," Reese said quietly.

Louise Tasker started to shake her head. "It's too risky. It—" She broke off, realizing it was the one sure way her father could be saved. Nothing more had been heard from Youngman, the St. Louis' lawyer, who had entered the case so mysteriously, then disappeared. "If you do go, take a posse with you! You must. There are our cowhands here. There is Mike and he can get help from Harris and the Dutchman. And—"

But again Reese was shaking his head. "No. A bunch would be sighted too easily on the way in. And there isn't time to wait to get word to Mike Canron."

"But you've had no rest, Mr. Reese!"

He smiled slightly. "As I said before, there isn't time. Strang is half crazed with his desire for vengeance. He'll have to strike fast now. He knows that. A little grub, and I'll be all right. Hank and Dusty, you'll come along with me, wait by the creek, then follow when I get them to take me to John Strang. . . ."

IT WAS afternoon when they reached the spot near where the creek ran into the cutbank in the foothills. From the cover of the timber, Reese pointed it out to Hank and Dusty, describing the location of the cave.

"How will you talk Gans into taking you to see this Strang, Doc?" Hank wanted to know.

"Leave that to me," Reese said confidently.

He moved his rested mustang out from the timber and down to the creek, entered it and turned upstream without a backward glance. There was no telling who might be watching him. But he did call softly over his shoulder:

"If I don't reappear in half an hour or so, slip in for a look-see."

He rounded a bend in the creek, pushed toward the little shelf where the saplings grew. The head of one of the gaunt, thin brothers standing guard, pushed out of the foliage, then Reese heard him calling into the cave mouth. The guard returned to goggle at Reese, covering him with a carbine.

"Come right in, Reeder," he said. "Trigger's waiting for you."

Reese tried to act as if he didn't know he was covered as he went into the tunnel, then around the bend and into the cave. Across it, against a wall, stood Trigger Gans, holsters filled. But his hand was in that side coat pocket where Reese knew he kept that .32. The other outlaws were fanned out, standing along the walls, a certain taut guarded air about them. Dan, whom Reese without being seen had trussed up when the bully was on guard, had the sneaky, vicious look of a whipped mongrel.

"Howdy, gents," Reese said casually.

Gans nodded, a meaningless smile on his face. "Sorta surprised to see you, Reeder."

"Why?" Reese answered, the picture of puzzlement. "I lit out for here as soon as I could get away from them Cain men."

He was gambling, shoving in his last stack of blue chips. He knew now, of course, that Solo John Cain was entirely innocent, and that Old Man Bennis, father of the missing witness to the fence

line killing of which Jim Tasker was accused, worked for Cain. Reese had no idea where Bennis was. But he had cooked up the idea of using him and Cain, the employer of Bennis' father, to play upon Trigger Gans' greed.

"What the devil do you mean?" Gans snapped, taken by surprise at this sudden twist of events. "The Cain men captured you? How?"

Reese shrugged. " I was in real bad shape when you fellers left, as you know. Dozed off again, I reckon. Then somebody was shaking me—one of them Umbrella cowhands." He shook his head. "Everything was like a dream, a bad dream. They dragged me out. I remember seeing him—" he pointed at Dan—"all trussed up in the cave mouth. I remember seeing the jug beside him—"

Flushed with anger, Gans stabbed a finger at Dan with his pale eyes suspicious.

"Just like I thought!" he roared. "You was smellin' like a cussed whisky mill when we came back and found you. You got yourself blind orry-eyed and them Umbrella gophers just walked in!"

"I wasn't drinking," Dan bleated.

"You'll pay for this later!" Gans cut him short, turning back to Reese. "Did they make you talk, Reeder?"

Reese couldn't have asked for a better cue. He cut his eyes to Si, the Cain man who had been planted in Gans' outfit. Si's right eye dropped slightly in a wink. Reese looked back at Gans, noting that the lobo boss had removed his hand from his coat pocket.

"Sure tried to, Trigger," Reese answered. "But I told 'em I was a stranger who'd just holed up with you gents for a night." He saw Gans begin to grin. "I even parleyed some with John Cain himself."

"What did he say?" Gans asked eagerly.

"Suppose I ask a few questions, Gans," Reese said sharply. "Where is a jasper named Bennis?"

Gans' eyes narrowed. "What do you know about him?"

"I know that John Cain would pay five thousand dollars for him." That was his big gamble, the hole-ace on which he staked everything. "His dad works for Cain. Cain seems right fond of the old man. And they got a hunch where young Bennis is."

Reese could sense the new-born tension in the cave.

"Five thous-and," Trigger Gans breathed. "John, the Boss, has had him hid somewheres ever since we grabbed him. I don't know where." He came over to Reese then and slapped him on the shoulder. "Reeder, I knew you was a smart one from the first—the very first. Now, how do we get the *dinero?*"

Reese shook his head slowly, smiling. "Yes, Trigger. I'm smart. That was the deal I made with Cain. He let me go, so I could get hold of the man who could deliver Bennis. And this John, the Boss, the man who can deliver young Bennis. You can't."

Trigger Gans bridled for a moment. "Cuss that John! We lost out last night, it seems, because we didn't hang Lever." He laughed. "Dang it, I thought we had him as good as dead. But who the devil does this John think he is, anyway? I can—"

REESE took a quick look at Si, then shook his head again.

"You can't deliver Bennis, Trigger. I'll work with you on the payoff." He winked. "We might even deal out this John when we learn what we want."

"Reeder, now we're talking business."

"So take me to John," Steve Reese said calmly.

It took Trigger Gans only a few seconds to make up his mind. He chuckled and nodded.

"All right, Reeder." He nodded then to his men. Hardware was holstered. "We'll all go. Don't reckon we'll come back here."

Putting on his sombrero, Gans leaned close to Reese to whisper. "Remember, Reeder, you find out where this Bennis is. Then it's you and me. We'll split."

Reese figured he was luckier than he had expected to be. Moments later he realized that Gans was a slick one, a smart lobo who took no unnecessary risks.

"Get the ponies in the hollow saddled up," Gans ordered Tim and another man. He repeated: "The ponies in the hollow."

They waited around a few minutes. Then Gans said, "All right, gents," and moved over to the back of the cave. Reese half-turned toward the tunnel leading out to the creek. Si tapped his arm.

"No, this way," he said. He started after the boss.

Reese didn't understand for a moment. He saw Gans go to a spot where a slight elbow of rock projected from the other side of the underground chamber. Then the big outlaw leader stepped sideward to his left—and disappeared. Another man did the same. Then Reese reached the spot, and saw that the elbow concealed another exit from the cave. His heart sank. It was a dark hole to the left that he would have to stoop to get into. As he stooped, something rustled in his shirt pocket. It was those stogies he had bought for Dusty and had forgotten to give him.

Reese's hair-trigger brain worked fast. He pulled out one of the gaudy-banded stogies and dropped it just beside the elbow, pointing behind it.

"Hey, you dropped a seegar," somebody said.

Apparently by accident, Reese crushed half of it with his boot.

"No good now," he muttered, and moved on into the low hole. When he didn't appear outside, coming down the creek, Dusty and Hank would come probing. Dusty might see the stogie of his own brand that pointed to the hidden tunnel.

The owlhoot bunch had moved about a hundred and fifty feet when Reese caught the glint of daylight through the foliage ahead that hid the end of the tunnel. Then they were out in a little hollow, north of the creek now. Tim and the other man came out of the trees with the ponies.

"Ain't taking no chances, so I used the back door," Gans said to Reese. "Some of them Umbrella snakes of Cain's might be watching the creek way . . . Take the roan, Reeder."

CHATER XIV

The Battle Is On

HEADING uphill, still further away from the point on the feeder creek where Dusty and Hank were watching, the mounted bunch pushed on. Then, along a faint trail higher up in the hills, they turned northward in the direction of Twin Forks, riding at a steady lope. Reese spoke to Trigger who was riding just ahead of him.

"Where does this John hole up?" he asked.

There was no answer from Gans except a quick grin over his shoulder. But Si, riding on Reese's right, said softly:

"Don't ask no questions, Reeder. Better that way."

When Reese threw him a swift look, the Cain man was staring straight ahead as if he had not spoken.

They rode on through the afternoon, veered down out of the foothills to a track that skirted the edge of the Basin rangeland. Reese heard the hooting whistle of a train, for the railroad was a little to the west.

They swung off the range and to the east just as the CPA man sighted the church steeple in the town. Then they were on a straggling road that ran toward the main street of Twin Forks. In the van, Trigger Gans slowed his bay cayuse to speak to Reese.

"Remember, Reeder, you and me, we're in this together."

Steve Reese nodded. But he knew well enough that Trigger Gans split with

nobody, worked with nobody.

They came around a bend in the side road beyond the edge of the town. On the left was an abandoned house with boarded-up windows, a front door sagging on a broken upper hinge, and with the rank grass in the yard hiding half of the first story. They rode past it, dropped over a low rise. In the hollow behind it, Gans turned in past some jackpines. They followed a path that led up behind the apparently abandoned house, dropped out of the saddle.

Gans gave a long whistle. A few moments passed. Then it was answered faintly from inside the house. Gans nodded and led the way to the back door, pulled it open.

"Are you there, John?" he called.

There was a vague answer from the front of the place. They moved on through the dilapidated kitchen, with one sagging corner of it open to the sky. Up a hallway to the front room. And there was John Strang, the sad-faced cripple, leaning on his gnarled cane as he stood in front of a chair. It was as dim as twilight inside the house.

"Trigger, I told you never to bring your bunch here!" Strang spat out in a thin, bitter voice.

"Something's happened, John," Gans answered him, pushing forward. "Seems like there's trouble. John, where's this young Bennis waddy?"

"Why?"

"Because Cain thinks he knows where Bennis is, John," Gans said. "And if he should be found and start to talk—well, I'd be in a tough spot. You know that. After all, Bennis knows I shot Allen Rice from ambush—the man Jim Tasker is charged with killing—after Rankin snapped a shot past Tasker. Bennis can talk if he's caught." Trigger Gans shoved back his hat. "Blamed if I understand your game, yet, John. But I want Bennis now."

Reese was amazed at what he listened to. In the dim light he had not yet been recognized by John Strang, but the lame man was peering at him past Gans. Reese eased a hand down to his right gun butt, started to fold the fingers around it—and a round hard gun muzzle was pushed into his back!

"Take it easy, Reeder," growled Dan's voice behind him. "Don't get nervous, now."

"Bennis won't do no talking no more," Strang said. "And where did you get your information about Cain knowing things, Trigger?"

"How do you know Bennis won't talk?"

"Because he's outside — behind the horse shed. Because he's got himself a six-foot claim. In other words, Gans, he's dead. Now?"

"Are you sure, John?" Gans asked. "I got information that—" He half-turned and gestured toward Reese. "Well, this Reeder here, he was in touch with John Cain and—"

"Reeder?" Strang peered. "You fool! That's Reese, the CPA field chief!" He grabbed for a gun.

But Reese had already moved. He had flung himself backward against that gun in the hand of Dan, forcing it downward. It was a chance he had to take. He twisted around as he snaked out a gun himself. But there was no shot. For Si had Dan covered. The two of them, Si and Steve Reese, sprang backward, covering the room.

Somebody yelled. Dan tried to bring his gun around on Reese who hit him across the side of the head with gusto, using his .38 barrel, dropping him. But Strang had drawn with snaky speed. He shot twice. The second time he got Cain's man, Si, through the left arm. It spun the man half around and into the doorway as he cursed. Reese jumped over in front of him to cover him. He sent a shot at one of the Gans outfit who had hauled a weapon.

And the battle was on!

REESE got out the door, hauling Si with him. He flung a couple of shots through it, reached to drag it closed as the gang hung back. In so doing, he had to leave the wounded Si uncovered

for a moment. Half-stunned from the wound, and enraged, the man jumped forward with a gun in his right hand. There was the crash of a report from inside the room. Si stumbled back with a moaning, bubbling sound issuing from his throat.

Reese slammed the door and whirled about as Si started to sink down to a sitting position against the wall of the hallway. Even in the dimness, Reese could see that he had caught it fatally in the chest. A red blossom slowly bloomed on Si's shirt front. Backing, the CPA field chief sent a slug through the door just to keep them cooped up in the room. He dropped on a knee beside the dark, low-browed Si who was working his mouth to speak.

"Tell—tell John—Cain—I—tried—to get—the deadwood—to—to—"

His lips worked, but no sound came; only a few little red bubbles. Then he smiled, unbelievably the smile of a cherub. And he slumped.

Reese knew then that John Cain had planted this man with the bunch in an attempt to break them, to find out who was behind them. Cain had been backing the law, though he would not come out openly and side him. And he thought he knew why now, too. But this was no time to be weighing things. He started down the hallway toward the back door.

It was flung open. Two men were just outside it, guns drawn, the two the canny Trigger Gans had surreptitiously signaled to stay with the ponies. The shots had drawn them to the house.

Both triggered at Reese. Escape was cut off that way. Swiftly he turned back to the rickety stairs leading to the floor above, just as the door of the front room was torn open. Bullets whipped at his heels as he raced up the stairs.

He got to the top, however, with one leg slightly nicked, as two men started to rush up. He aimed and got the leading one through the shoulder, slamming him back on the other. Both went tumbling back down.

"The other stairs!" Strang bawled from the dimness below.

That puzzled Reese. He hadn't noticed another flight of stairs when they had come through the house from the rear. He sent another shot at a figure he saw in the dim hall, and whipped a look over his shoulder for another stairway. As on the floor below, a hall ran straight back. He could see no stair landing.

In the lull he refilled the hot smoking .38, shucked out his other weapon. He sighted a flattened form trying to edge up one side of the stairs. Reese triggered. There was a howl from the man, hit in the arm. Steve Reese hated bloodshed and violence, but he was cornered now, and it was strike and wound or be cut down.

He got the proof of that, if he had needed it, an instant later. Four or five guns crackled from unseen hands down in the dimness at the foot of the stairs. They had been waiting for the flash of his gun to pick him out. And they almost picked him off. Lead hailed around him. One chunk sliced open his cheek, drawing blood.

Reese was in a tough spot, thanks to the secret exit from the outlaw cave. Because of that, Dusty and Hank had missed him and been unable to follow on the back trail. He twisted his head around for some means either of escape or where he could make a real stand. And he was just in time to see a head and shoulders emerging from a trap-door at the back of the hall. It probably was reached by a ladder built against the kitchen wall. Many houses had these.

Again his weapons spoke. The man ducked down like something disappearing in a chute, grazed on the side of the head. Reese looked back down the stairs. The men hadn't started to come up again yet. But he knew there would be a rush simultaneously with outlaws forcing their way up the ladder and opening fire the instant they got to the top.

He took a couple of steps back down the hall. And then he saw it—a little side hall that branched off to his left.

In a flash, he was in it. It was only some fifteen feet long, with a door opening at either side at the end. Reese took

the right one, toward the rear of the house. He found himself in a musty old room, having to break through spider webs when he stepped through. There were just a couple of rotting pieces of furniture and a cot with a rat-ridden mattress on it. He waited just inside the door he left open a crack, listening to men coming cautiously up the creaking stairs. There were creaking floor boards at the back of the hall, too. So he knew they were piling up the ladder as well. Doors were flung back with a smash. Then a muffled voice said:

"That side hall!"

TWO men came around the turn into it, guns out. Reese let ride with the trigger, his gun muzzle through the door crack. A man cursed as he got a slug in the leg. Both jumped back out of sight. Reese heard Trigger Gans' curse. Gans knew he had the drop on anybody coming around the turn into that narrow hallway. And in the gloom, they couldn't even see him behind the door. Then came the thin, bitter voice of Strang.

"Reese, we can burn the house down around you!" he cried. "We can throw a ring around it, set it afire, then either cut you down when you come out or watch you fry! Come out and give yourself up and we swear to let you live!"

Reese laughed coldly. They would let him live just like he would make friends with a sidewinder.

"We'll burn the house down on you, Reese!" Strang repeated furiously.

And Reese knew they could!

Again he looked around for some avenue of escape. The lone window was boarded up. He tiptoed over and tried the boarding. It was heavy, still firmly nailed. He could hammer it out with a gun, but they would hear him, guess what he was doing, and have a reception committee waiting as he came through.

Then he saw the brick chimney against the side wall. It was crumbling, the mortar having dried out long since. He glanced up to where it went through the roof. Up there, where it passed through to the outside, he could see daylight. That told him the top part of the chimney outside of the old house had been blown off. He went back to the door.

"Give me five minutes to think it over, Strang!" he called.

He knew now he had to play for and fight for time, time for Hank and Dusty to get there. That was, provided they found his stogie sign. But he was sure he could depend on them. And if he just got free and lighted out now himself, Strang and the Gans bunch would be dead certain to escape.

There was some whispering out in the hall. Then Gans answered. "Five minutes! No more. No less. All right."

Reese worked fast. He closed the door, hauled the old cot over to set against it as a barricade. Holstering his .38's, he moved the dust-covered chest of drawers over against the chimney, clambered up on the chest and yanked on one of the chimney bricks near the roof. It came out with a crackling of mortar and a small cloud of dust. He put it down on the chest. Working swiftly then, he removed brick after brick from the upper part of the chimney just under the roof.

Some of the bricks stuck. It was necessary then to gouge away with desperate speed with his knife. Three bricks tumbled loose and thumped to the floor. He held his breath. But there was no action outside. He worked faster, cutting his fingers, tearing his hands as he yanked at stubborn bricks. A small gap of daylight showed.

"How about it in there, Reese? We ain't got all day, yuh doublecrosser!" That was Gans.

"I got to think more," Reese called back, stalling as his hands fairly flew.

A whole clump of several bricks on the side almost tumbled and he had to embrace them to hold them. He lowered the section to the chest. Then, half a minute later, he had a sizable gap in two sides of the chimney and there was the hole to the roof where there was no more chimney.

He took a deep breath, reached up through the chimney, gripped the edges of the roof, and hoisted himself. It was

going to be a tight fit. He got an arm over the edge, levered with an elbow, and got his shoulders through by tilting them, one after the other.

From below came a muffled call. Then he was pulling his hips through, standing erect on the sloping roof. Marooned, perhaps. But he got a break. About five feet from the eaves, a fair-sized tree grew beside the house. He worked down to the edge of the roof, leaped, caught at a crotch formed by a big limb.

Quickly he worked down the trunk to the ground, then lit out for the little clump of stunted trees down in the hollow where the ponies had been left. It wasn't just plain flight he intended. If he could stampede the ponies, Strang would be stranded with Gans and his bunch.

The rusty hinges of the back door complained in a long-drawn squawk. The running Reese half-turned. It was to see big Trigger Gans filling the back door, that smirk on his browned face, a Colts spiking from his left hand.

"So-o," was all he said.

And he came toward Steve Reese.

CHAPTER XV

Owlhoot Clean-up

GRIMLY Steve Reese realized that it would be suicide to try to reach the trees now. Trigger Gans would cut him down at his first step. He held his ground a little way down the side of the hollow, wondering what could have caused Gans to come downstairs just at the right time to sight him through a window and step right out after him.

Gans came on unhurriedly—and alone—as if dead certain of something, of the outcome as well. Reese waited as Gans came up with short, measured steps. There was a strange greenish light in the atmosphere, for the sky had become overcast with a legion of glowering darkbrowed clouds.

Then a gun crashed. Only this time it was not a six-gun that spoke, but was the longer, flat slap of a rifle.

It almost got Reese, just as he saw the barrel poked over a window sill on the first floor. And John Strang's pious face, blank as a stone slab now, was behind it. So that was why Gans was so sure of himself!

Reese threw himself sideward to avoid a second shot. His bullet-nicked leg collapsed under him. He fell sideward. And Trigger, grinning as usual, cut loose. Reese propped himself on an elbow, against the ground. With deadly coolness, he fired back twice.

Trigger Gans jerked up like a man coming to attention, a look of ghastly amazement on his face. Then he half-turned on his heels, revealing the right side of his face smeared with gore. He toppled and went rolling down the hill into the hollow. He was in no danger of getting dizzy. Reese's bullet in his brain had been almost instantaneously fatal.

Reese again headed down the grade for the hollow where the ponies had been held. But he limped badly because of the wounded leg on which he had crashed. It was only a flesh wound, but painful.

Finally he got to the bottom of the hill, passing Trigger Gans' corpse, and threw himself toward the trees. The whole pack would be on him pronto. If he could get mounted, then run off the ponies, he could win out yet.

He glanced back. Coming behind him with incredible swiftness, minus any cane, not crying out, was John Strang. Reese had not guessed it before, but that cane had been unnecessary, a cover-up, a stage prop to make Strang look innocuous, to match his pious face. He carried a .45 now instead of the rifle.

Behind him, at the top of the hollow, the first of the gunmen from the house were beginning to pour down. But Strang had been smart enough to realize he couldn't let Reese drive off the horses. And Reese realized that he would be cut down if he took the time to try it.

He jumped in among the trees, then jumped out again a few feet further along. Strang, coming along in great hops like some giant frog, was surprised, caught off-guard. He tried to get his guns up, but Reese had the jump. He fired and caught the man in the side.

Strang half-twisted, then doubled up with pain, his own gun hand falling to his side. Then the daring Reese was on him in a leap, despite his own leg wound. With a blow of his gun barrel, he struck Strang's weapon from his hand and ordered:

"Get in there in those trees, quick!"

Strang was ashen. Yet he spat once in disgust. Then, holding his side, bent over a little, he obeyed, marching ahead of the field chief. No lead was flung around them, for the outlaws feared to hit Strang.

He shoved Strang on in ahead to the small break in the trees where the ponies were tethered.

"Johnny—Phil!" some self-constituted outlaw leader bawled. "Swing around the other side! We'll ring him in!"

And Reese knew then there was going to be no chance of riding out with his prisoner. Alone, he probably could break through. But not with Strang in tow. And Strang was the key to the whole thing, the man who had loosed the wave of bloodshed in the Basin and who must answer to the law. Strang as a prisoner, could save Jim Tasker's life. But if Reese rode out alone, Strang would escape.

Reese made no attempt to mount one of the saddled-up ponies as the wounded Strang dropped down on a rock.

A couple of minutes passed. Then a voice shouted impatiently;

"Aw, the devil with Strang! He ain't our boss. But that danged Reese polecat killed Trigger! Let's go in and get him!"

Somebody else agreed. "I'm with you! Strang ain't our boss. Come on!"

REESE peered through some pushed-back foliage. They were coming, working in low through the high grass, darting from a boulder to a hummock, bellying in. He could see grass tops jerk and sway, indicating men on two sides. They had him ringed in.

He looked down at the slumped Strang. His hostage had become worthless. Reese figured it was either make a stand and finally get fumed down uselessly—or surrender. If only Dusty and Hank had been able to back-trail him in!

It was like an apparition. For even with Reese's desperate thought, up there around the corner of the old house, appeared Dusty Trail and red-headed Hank Ball. Behind them came Pancho Smith and Mike Canron. The barrels of their drawn guns gleamed faintly in the strange greenish light as they trotted forward. Reese thought it must be a desperation-born mirage until he glimpsed the familiar cigar stub in Dusty's mouth. Then Reese heard hoofbeats.

He turned the other way, parted the foliage. A big band of riders was swinging down into the hollow on that side, from the trail. Solo John Cain was riding at the head of his tough crew. And beside him was Louise Tasker.

Guns crackled. One man jumped up out of the grass, arms flung wide. Another tried to run for it. But a Cain man spurred after him and cut him down with a gun barrel blow. There were a few more shots, and that was all. The Gans bunch was hemmed in themselves now, and afoot in the bargain.

Reese started out of the little stand of trees, yelling to his friends, knowing his prisoner couldn't escape. But he thought to look back at him, wondering why he had been so meek. That glance was just in time. John Strang had slipped a hidden knife from his boot and was about to plunge it into his own ribs. Reese flung back, grabbed the man's arm and twisted. With his elbow, he banged Strang on the jaw, dazing him so that he dropped the knife.

"Doc, are you there?" roared Dusty.

"Are you hurt, Doc?" yelled Hank.

"Coming right out, and with a fat prize!" Reese replied.

He began to drag John Strang out of the grove. . . .

Reese stepped from the back door of the ramshackle house after his parley with Solo John Cain inside. Cain stood in the doorway with a sheepish grin on his face. Reese walked over to the little knot of supporters, giving Louise a smile. The alert, fearless girl had been a great help. When Reese and his two aides had left, she had sent one rider across the range in hope of picking up Mike Canron. She had sent another to John Cain's place. Then she had led them up into the hills, knowing the country, coming toward the cave from the north. There they had encountered Hank and Dusty just as the CPA men were emerging from the secret back tunnel of the cave.

Reese's stogie sign that had been left in the cave had worked, tipping them off. Horse sign in the hollow had told them the bunch had departed. But it had been simple to trail them here to the old house that was Strang's hideout.

Now Strang sat on a stump, hunched, silent, a snarl on his embittered face. Off a little distance, Cain's men were holding the Trigger Gans outfit prisoners.

Reese talked to Louise and Mike Canron and Pancho Smith, with his two aides, Dusty and Hank, standing by.

"Well, I guess you all see how it was now. Strang came back to get vengeance for his brother's hanging years ago. He was out to get every man who was mixed up in it, or his descendants. His game was to set you at each other's throats, to get you hung legally." Reese shook his head. "He almost pulled it off, too. But now, Miss Louise, your father will be out of jail in a few hours. Plenty of Trigger Gans' bunch are ready to turn State's evidence to save their own necks. But another man will face a killer charge that can be proved. These men heard Strang admit he'd killed young Bennis. And he hired the killer of Allen Rice." He looked at Strang who was muttering curses because they hadn't sent for a sawbones for him. But Reese knew the man's wound was not serious. He hadn't meant it to be. "It'll be the rope for him beyond any doubt."

He winked back at Cain in the doorway.

"Now, I have a few things to tell you about John Cain," he said. "Incidentally, Miss Louise, he was the one who brought the lawyer Youngman, to defend your father. The reason he didn't come out in the open in this case is because he did time once himself. And he was ashamed of it. I've convinced him that plenty of well-to-do upstanding cowmen made their mistakes, too, in their youth. It's how you behave afterward that counts. Remembering his own jail experience is why he hired so many ex-convicts for his outfit. He knew how hard it was for a man to get a job when he came out of the Big House. And he wanted to give them a chance to go straight." Reese cleared his throat. "That's about all. Except I want to thank you folks for getting here in time to save my hide."

CANRON stepped forward, chuckling, to drop a hand on Reese's shoulder. "Shucks, man, you practically busted up this whole thing single-handed. We didn't do anything. Me, all I did was blunder."

Louise laughed with relief now that she knew her father was safe.

"Let's ride in and get Dad out of jail, then go out to our ranch for a big party!" she exclaimed.

Reese turned to beckon the shy Solo John Cain forward.

"Mr. Cain demands that the celebration be held at his *rancho*," he informed. "He said it needs to be warmed up by some guests, that he's tired of wandering around that big place alone."

Louise stepped over close to Reese. "You'll come, of course."

But Reese shook his head. Hank's face and Dusty's fell. "We've got to push on. As we were coming in on this case, I got a message from Colonel Beauvine that we have a rustling affair to settle over in the Faro Flats country . . . We'll have to be pulling stakes."

Louise looked disappointed. Then she reached up, took Steve Reese's face in her two hands, and kissed him hard. Reese didn't fight to break away.

Dal smashed a looping left fist to Joe Cully's mouth

A Pioneer Folk Story

by HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

BACKFIRE

When wrongs cut so deep no laws can cover them, Dal Baldwin deals justice according to his own code!

"Count your many blessin's—name 'em one by one,
And it will surprise you what the Lord hath—uh—"

THE rasping, gravelly-toned voice of little Doc Carson was cut short by the whang of a rifle shot.

Doc shifted a quick glance up at his

companion, Dal Baldwin, first settler at the Sun Bear Valley homestead wilderness.

At a second shot Baldwin ducked.

"What in tarnation do you think's goin' on, Dal?" Carson asked. He was crouched in behind a thick clump of willows.

Dal's forehead was furrowed.

"Can't say, Doc," he answered softly. "Don't know anyone who'd want to potshoot at us. I don't know of anyone in this east territory."

"N-no. Besides, Dal, it's closed season on deer and antelope. But you're game ranger now. Hadn't we better go take a look-see?"

Dal smiled. He had a deep admiration for his little friend and neighbor, his first neighbor.

Throughout the years on this wild frontier Dal and his wife Mary had been grateful for the coming of Doc and Marta Carson. Their friendliness, support, alliance had been grand.

Many times, together, they had been called on to fight to protect their rights, their lives, against the elements or crooked frontier characters.

Dal was now disturbed. This was Sunday. He and Doc had left Marta Carson and Mary Baldwin at Dal's place, while they, Dal and Doc, walked to the east to scout a stand of fence post timber material and also the land beyond the big swamp—land which Dal hoped to reserve for filing by his youngest son, Ten.

Though he had been appointed to the job as game guardian, Dal disliked having to enforce game laws. You couldn't expect homesteaders to forego the right to kill a deer or elk when fresh meat was badly needed.

The law had come to Sun Bear Valley chiefly for the purpose of conservation —to prevent nomadic Indians or trappers from wiping out the game animals, especially the little band of antelope.

DAL glanced down at his companion now. Doc was grinding steadily on his inevitable cud of eating tobacco.

"Okay, Doc, we'll go take a look," Dal said. "We were haided in that direction anyhow."

"Don't forgit we ain't packin' no gun, Dal," Doc said hoarsely.

Dal grinned.

"What do you expect to find, Doc?"

Doc spat testily. "Never can tell," he rasped back. "There was shootin', east, for sure. There's strangers in the country. It's usual for newcomers to show theirselves, ain't it?"

Dal nodded as he started off with long-legged strides. Doc had difficulty keeping up. His left leg seemed permanently bent with an arthritic condition.

They were skirting the big swamp when suddenly Dal froze. Off right, a handsome antelope buck flashed his rump patches as he broke, to leap high. Dal swung as the little band of pronghorns whirled over a hogback ridge to fan out in bounding leaps.

A rifle blasted. The big buck leaped higher, to crash heavily, stone dead.

"Uh, right under our very noses, Dal!" little Doc gasped.

Baldwin made sharp clacking sounds with his tongue and teeth. For two years Dal and his neighbors had carefully preserved the little pronghorn band which were now protected by law for five years. Coyotes and wolves took their toll of the band, but not for some time had they been molested by man.

"When you file on your quarter section, Ten," Dal had told his youngest boy, "it'll be your job to protect the pronghorn band."

Dal's frown deepened. He turned to Doc.

"Reckon I'll have to act now, Doc," he said crisply. "We've got the evidence."

"Yeah." Doc got to his feet. "Let's go!"

But Baldwin hesitated. He was staring at the point at which the buck had dropped.

Suddenly his eyes widened, flashing. A man was moving forward, a broad-shouldered man clad in heavy homespun pants and thick black shirt.

Another man, a bigger, older man, came up through a fringe of brush.

"Two, Doc," Dal said. "Maybe father and son. Come on, and clamp the bit on your tongue, huh?"

They strode forward.

"Husky jaspers," Doc whispered. Dal nodded. When within hailing distance, he called out. The strangers spun.

Shortly Dal came to a halt alongside the killed buck. He glanced sharply down at the handsome creature, then swiftly faced the strangers.

"Howdy," he said calmly. "Strangers, ain't you?"

The bigger, older man drew the back of a hand across sweeping iron gray mustaches that, with stubble whiskers, framed his big mouth. He was glaring at Dal under shaggy eyebrows as he worked his jaws.

"Howdy," he grunted. "You lookin' for somethin', somebody?"

"Just—lookin'," Doc Carson answered, slitting a stream of tobacco juice deftly through a gap in his gold-capped front teeth.

There was an awkward moment or so of silence. Dal didn't know how to size up these strangers, save physically. They were big, with shirts open at the throat and chests showing matted hair.

"You're new here," Dal said at last.

"Come in a week ago," the older man said. "Settled just east of the swamp. Cully's the name—Lem Cully: that's my son, Joe. You must be folks from that Sun Bear country, west, where we heard the church bell ringin'."

"Right, Cully," Dal answered. "I'm Baldwin, Dal Baldwin; this is my friend and neighbor, Doc Carson."

LITTLE Doc nodded grudgingly.

"We were just moseyin' east checkin' up on fence post timber at the swamp," Dal went on. "Heard the shootin', so—"

A wide grin from Lem Cully stopped him.

"Wal, now, ain't it too bad you're just a mite too late," Cully said thickly.

"Late?"

"Yeah. We've done settled the half section east of the swamp, which means we take in all the timber."

Doc Carson's face twisted as he shot a glance Dal's way. Marta Carson, Doc's big wife, had brought both Ten and Jim Baldwin into the world. The Carsons were almost as deeply interested in the Baldwin boys as were their own parents.

"You got filin' papers?" Dal asked.

"You got any right to be askin' questions?" Cully countered.

Dal shrugged. Cully turned and growled an order to his son:

"Get that critter's throat cut, Joe!" he directed.

The young man drew a knife and dropped to his knees beside the buck, but Dal Baldwin stepped in.

"Hold it, Cully," he said sharply. "It happens that the antelope are in closed season for five years, and it happens I'm game warden for this territory."

Lem Cully bugled through flared nostrils. He gave a sharp hitch to his belt as he stepped forward.

Ordinarily, had the Cully's been desirable settlers, folk who had presented themselves as good neighbors, Dal would have been inclined to pass over the killing of the buck—pass it over with a caution, a friendly caution. But Dal didn't like the attitude of these hulking strangers.

He fished a badge from his pocket.

"Ever see one of these before, Cully?" he asked the elder Cully.

"Uh, do tell, now!" Lem Cully answered, chuckling. "Since when has a homesteader, needin' fresh meat, had to pay any attention to a badge? *Tch! Tch!*"

"That's how the law in these parts reads, feller," Doc Carson said.

Cully swung round to glare at little Doc.

"I wasn't askin' you, sawed-off," he growled.

He turned again to Dal, leaving Doc wincing, smarting.

"Now, you don't aim to try and enforce

that stupid law, do you now, Baldwin?" he asked. . . .

Dal didn't like his tone of voice. It seemed couched in challenge, in threat.

"I'm afraid that's how it's got to be," Dal answered.

He turned to young Cully, again calling on him to hold his knife.

"You heard what I said," Dal called out. "It's the law talkin'."

But the young man grinned and went on skinning out a hind leg, as his father moved closer in.

"I wouldn't git too salty about this, Baldwin, if I were you," Lem Cully said heavily. "We ain't lookin' for trouble, but we do need fresh meat. Now I reckon it's time for you and that sawed-off little runt to mosey on, huh?"

That touched off the fuse of Doc's temper.

"Why, you all-fired over-sized chimpanzee," he roared. "Who the hell do you think you're talkin' about?"

Doc swung a fist, but Dal was in to block the blow with an arm.

"Hold 'er, Doc," he said.

But the damage was done! The younger Cully rose quickly to his feet and drove a hard, straight right to Doc's mouth.

It was fortunate for little Doc that he had seen the blow start and was going back. But it did connect, rocking him back hard on his seat. His lip was cut, a tooth loosened.

DAL BALDWIN'S eyes flashed. He swung, and caught young Cully as he attempted to rush forward at Doc again. Dal caught the young man by the shirt front, and swung him around.

"Your father's Sharps don't scare me any, young man," he said heatedly. "You hadn't ought to have done that, strike a man so much older and smaller'n yourself."

Dal's right hand stayed cocked as a heavy hand clamped on his shoulder.

He turned. Lem Cully was glaring at him.

"I ain't got the Sharps no more, Baldwin," the big man said. "Now, go ahead with what you had in mind. Make your play."

Dal's hand on the young man's shirt relinquished its grip as slowly he turned to face the elder Cully.

A fever of desire for action surged through Dal's brain, but wisdom laid a restraining hand on his impulse. He was thinking of little Doc. Should a fight ensue, it was little Doc who would take the stiffest beating.

Dal stepped back.

"Okay," he said gruffly. "Have it your way for the time bein', but I'm still layin' a charge against you. You can expect to hear from Deputy Marshal Syme, of Cody, any time. He's actin' Sheriff of this territory, too."

Dal turned and nodded to Doc, whose small eyes were dancing with resentment. Doc had already picked out a suitable club for battle action. It was a small windfall birch lying near by.

But now he turned and limped along at Dal's side. Doc ground steadily on his eating tobacco. He was very silent, for Doc.

"Reckon you figure I turned yellow, sudden, huh?" Dal said softly.

Doc came to a sudden halt, and spun. Laughter reached them, mocking laughter from the Cullys.

"Hear them?" Doc growled.

"We should have grabbed up clubs and took 'em apart, Dal!"

Dal smiled mirthlessly. "It wasn't easy to turn away, Doc," he said. He, too, was stung by that mocking laughter.

"Just exactly what d'you think of them, Doc?"

LITTLE Doc spat, made a vulgar noise with his throat, and drew the back of a hand impatiently across his hurt mouth, wincing with the sharp pain.

"The Cully jaspers ain't no more real settlers than old Baldy there." Doc pointed to a tall, patriarchal tamarac in the swamp, an old-time landmark.

"Just roamers, you think, huh?" Dal said, turning.

"That's right, Dal. Seen their kind before. They squat on land a while, make a heap of trouble, then shove off, or git run out on a fence rail. Just plumb, plain, cussed ornery!"

Dal Baldwin swore softly to himself as they struck the creek trail, the trail whose first dim wagon tracks had been made years ago when Dal and his lovely bride Mary had waggoned in to establish a homesite here in the ruggedly beautiful valley.

When their sons were born, the Baldwins became tomorrow's folk. All that mattered to them in their struggles was the welfare of their boys, their future.

And now Dal faced the realization that he had lost that quarter section he had hoped to reserve for young Ten. Jim, the older boy, was already secured with a quarter at the Valley Beyond, to the west.

"What do you aim to do, actual, Dal?" Doc asked.

"Aim to lay a charge, Doc; it's my duty!" Dal answered. "I'm wonderin' what sort of a story you're goin' to give Marta, about your busted mouth. Hurt a lot?"

Doc shrugged.

"I got that all 'tended to, Dal. It's Sunday, but—I done slipped in the swamp and hit my mouth against a tree. But these Cully jaspers. I—" Doc broke off sharply, his eyes narrowed.

"Yeah. What about them, Doc?"

"Well, Dal, we got us bad neighbors. Maybe I was wrong at first there. I've been thinkin' it might be best just to let 'em bluff us out this time."

"And let them get away with that antelope killin', Doc? Why, in a couple of seasons they'd have the entire prong-horn band killed off!"

Doc spat his expended tobacco cud out and replenished his empty cheek.

"I know it's bad, Dal," he grunted. "But, stick 'em with this charge and we've made a pair of tough enemies. You could see they wear just that brand, boy!"

Dal could see the logic of Doc's declaration, yet he was disinclined to let the Cullys get away with their buck killing. He had occasion to go up to Cody right away. It was time to file on young Jim's quarter.

Dal's mind was made up: He would talk it over with Marshal Frank Syme, his friend.

Sun Bear Valley folk observed the laws. They were all closely knit by strong community spirit, a neighborliness and understanding that made for good progress, for peace.

Frank Syme would decide what action should be taken.

They were in sight of the home yard now, and Doc came to a sharp halt, gripping Dal's near arm.

"Eh-h! Just look at 'em!" he called out, chuckling, pointing to Dal's two husky young sons at play in the horse corral.

Dal's eyes flashed as he watched the boys wrestle.

"Ten's ketchin' up to Jim, I do believe, Doc," Dal said huskily. "Like young colts, huh?"

"Yeah, thoroughbreds, Dal. Man alive! I—"

DOC broke off, his torn mouth quivering. His eyes batted sharply.

He and Marta had never had a child. These boys of Baldwins' meant a great deal to the Carsons.

He swung to face Dal.

"Reckon you're right all along, Dal," he said. "See Frank. Let him take over. We'll side him if he needs help keepin' them Cullys tamed."

Doc's voice was quavery with emotion. . . .

"Best not say too much, if anything about the Cullys, Doc," Dal cautioned. "You busted your lip against a tamarac. Let it go at that. I'm pullin' out for Cody, with young Jim tomorrow. You and Marta make up a list of stuff you want me to freight in, huh?"

Doc nodded. Together they strode on to the smart little log house snuggled prettily against its back drop of evergreen and deciduous trees up from the creek flat.

Two days later, at Cody, Dal smiled as he handed the filing papers to young Jim.

"Yours, Jimmy, boy," he said as he shook his son's hand. "You'll do well. You'll have good neighbors there, with Phil Cody and his wife. But, of course, you'll only be there part time, to get your residence in."

Jim nodded. "Thanks, Dad," he said. "I'm too excited to say much. But I won't be leavin' home for a spell, not ever, actually."

They moved across the street to the marshal's office, but Dal was disappointed. Frank Syme was away up into the mountain country on a case of rustling.

Dal left a message there with a deputy. He and young Jim then went out to the trading store, to pick up freight for themselves, for the Cotton Store, for Marta and Doc Carson.

Frank Syme had not reported back in by the following noon, and Dal could spare no more time. He had harvesting work to do.

First, there was a second crop of alfalfa hay to take off, and then the main harvest, the oats, and the wheat, and besides, he had to lend a hand to Doc Carson with his crop.

As they rode back in the wagon, Jim Baldwin turned and gazed proudly at a smart breaking plow his father had bought for him.

He already had a spread of three good young work horses. Ten had promised to help him out at the Valley Beyond.

Jim now turned to his father. "How did Doc really bust his mouth, Dad?" he asked.

Dal started. He turned, and smiled. "I was hopin' nobody would challenge Doc's story, Jimmy," Dal said.

The youth's brows flicked up. "You mean there was other trouble?"

"That's right. A couple of salty jaspers have squatted on the half section east of the swamp, Jim. Ten's quarter is gone!" Dal broke off, his mouth tightening.

"Ten's quarter?" Jim Baldwin's voice was husky. "And we've been talkin' about that a lot, Dad, how we were goin' to trade work. Will I have to—to tell—Ten?"

Dal shook his head. "Don't say anythin', Jim. Keep it a secret, but it would be best if you sort of steered Ten away from the swamp and the land east. Them Cullys are plumb cussed. You might get into a heap of trouble. *Sabe?*"

"Okay, Dad. But come winter we figured on trappin' there at the swamp—weasel an' mink. I'll have some job keepin' Ten away."

"That's it, son. You'll have *some* job. Now let's forget it a spell. Lots of work ahead. Next spring, boy, we'll be clearin', plowin', up at the west end of the Valley Beyond. Sound good?"

"Sounds—keno, Dad."

JIM gripped his father's arm warmly. His eyes batted sharply. They didn't come any better than his parents—not anywhere, any time.

The horses now tossed their heads and quickened pace for they could tang the home country. Dal Baldwin raised his head.

"Seems like I, too, can smell the grain and the alfalfa, boy," he said softly. "Look, Jim! There's the church."

Dal pointed. The handsome log cupola reared, to show itself in a pretty setting.

"Like a Christmas card picture, Dad," young Jim commented. "The church in the evergreens, huh?"

Dal nodded and smiled.

Had this been the winter season, Jim would have hit the comparison perfectly.

Shortly the horses turned, and ahead lay the Baldwin home acreage, a sight that never failed to electrify watchers, travelers, with interest.

It was all, in panorama—house, barns, fences, equipment, crops, stock, a tribute to the unconquerable spirit of first pioneers.

The Baldwins worked hard at their harvest, father and sons side by side.

Two weeks had gone by since the incident east of the swamp and still Dal had received no word from Marshal Syme. Nor had he or his kindred seen any more

of the Cullys.

Today, Baldwin shifted his moving outfit along to Doc Carson's, to begin the cutting of oats.

Big Deacon Forster, the new parson, was on hand. Young Jim Baldwin ran the mower, while the others bound and stooked sheaves. Doc had a good crop and proudly strutted back and forth.

Not yet had the settlers of Sun Bear Valley bought a self-binder. That would probably come the following year.

The work was hard in the warm autumn sun.

Dal Baldwin straightened, to con the district with searching eyes. Little Doc's place was very rugged. He could never hope to break and till much acreage, but it was a beautiful sector, snugged against the rolling, timbered hills to the north and west, and open to the south along the creek.

Dal was still standing, gazing off toward the east when he was startled by the appearance of his wife along the creek trail. Mary was hurrying.

Dal swung and strode to meet her.

Mary's face was pale, drawn, her lovely eyes wide. Her mouth quivered as she started to speak. Dal flung an arm about her.

"Now just steady it, honey," he said softly. "Just what's the trouble?"

"It's—Ten, Dal. He—he came home beaten up. He was east when he came across two men, those Cullys you told me about."

"Yeah, Mary. Go on!" Dal's voice quavered with emotion.

"They were dressing out a steer, Dal, a black Angus, one of the Morrison steers. Well, you know young Ten. He walked up on them, challenged their right to the steer."

MARY broke off, sobbing. Dal held her closely while a fever of anger mounted in his brain.

Now he stirred. "I'll hitch Doc's team, run Marta and you back to our place in a hurry," he said.

He whirled away and loped on to the Carson yard.

Young Ten, his son, had been beaten. His mind was charged with self reproach. He should have told young Ten everything, cautioned him! He swore in his bitterness.

"This is it!" he said. "I'm not waitin' for the marshal. There's another law."

He saw Marta feeding chickens and quickly called to her, as he raced to the corral to lead up Doc's work team and harness them.

On the way out, Dal told Doc the story. At once little Doc's eyes glinted.

"We'll be right along, Dal. Me and the Deacon. Jim can keep on cuttin'. The oats won't come to no harm."

Dal picked up his wife and flicked the horses with a line end. Shortly they were at the Baldwin yard; at the house.

Dal helped the heavy Marta to the ground, hitched the team and hurried on in.

Marta was on her knees beside young Ten's bed. Dal swallowed sharply when he saw his son's face—swollen, cut, discolored.

He moved in beside the efficient Marta. Dropping to his knees, he caught up one of Ten's hands.

"Ten, boy—can you hear me?" he asked softly.

The youth nodded.

"Yes, Dad. I hurt all over. I—can't talk much. It was the young feller east there, mostly. The old one kicked me in the side when I was down."

A stifled cry like a strangled half sob broke in Dal's throat as he got to his feet. Mary Baldwin clutched his arm tightly.

"Calm down a bit, Dal dear," she cautioned.

Dal winced. He felt as though he would explode any moment.

Marta Carson was making a thorough examination of Ten's hurts. She now got to her feet, and turned to the Baldwins. Her eyes were moist with tears that had already begun to tipple over her eyelids.

"One, mebbe two, ribs cracked," she said. "I'll bind him up, but you'd best get Doc Curry down from Cody to check

him over. I don't think it's too serious. It don't hurt him too bad when he breathes, and that's a good sign."

Marta moved on to the kitchen to stoke up the stove. She pushed a kettle on to the front.

Dal stooped and patted one of Ten's hands, then turned. Out of doors, he saw Doc Carson and Deacon Forster riding up, both aboard the same lumbering horse.

Quickly Dal gave them the news. "I'll have to get the doc in," he said. "Marta says it would be wise."

"I'll do that for you, Dal boy," Deacon Forster said. "Right away. Show me the team I can take and I'll leave at once. And Dal, my friend, just try to be as calm as you can. Those Cullys are bad. They could do you a lot more harm. I'll see if I can't get a line on Syme while I'm at Cody."

Shortly, the Deacon was rattling along the north trail, while Dal and Doc leaned against a corral fence.

Doc Carson scarcely knew how to talk to his friend. He could himself sense what Dal was thinking, planning. Doc was determined to side Dal in whatever Dal planned to do in reprisal.

"Things are gettin' dry, Dal. Have you noticed? Grass, small brush. I noticed it special as we rode along."

Dal started. He swung toward the east, where the waving grass was well browned.

"Yeah, you're right, Doc. Could do—with rain." He turned to stare, wide-eyed into Doc's batting eyes.

"I just can't think straight, Doc," he said huskily. "I want to keep within the law, but—by gosh! I've seen young Ten, talked with him. Those jaspers beat him up bad."

Doc Carson's jaws increased their pace as they ground on the cud of tobacco.

"Can't for the life of me figure what's happened to Frank, Dal. Mebbe sick, or perhaps wounded. Never can tell. What do you want to do, Dal?"

"I want to—*kill*, Doc!"

Dal's fists clenched till the knuckles showed white. His mouth tightened to a thin, hard line.

"I want to go east, to tear into them jaspers with my bare hands, Doc. But I got to think of Mary. I ain't afraid for my own self, Doc."

Little Doc clutched at one of his friend's hands. His breathing was sharp in the emotional storm that raged in his own brain.

"I got no young'uns, Dal," he said. "I'm older than you are. How about if I go east and smoke them hellions out?"

A SOFT, whimsical smile widened Dal's mouth as he squeezed his friend's arm.

"Thanks, neighbor," he said softly. "Let's go get us some coffee. I want a clear head for thinkin' this whole thing out."

Doc Carson smiled, a strange mirthless smile, as he limped along at Dal's side, to the house. At the stoop he paused. His eyes glinted as he gazed on toward the east, beyond the boundary of the Baldwins' cultivated land.

Now he turned and moved softly into the boys' small annex bedroom where Marta was still busy bathing Ten's bruises and lacerations.

Dal Baldwin turned to slyly watch the effect on Doc's weather-beaten face. Doc was badly shaken. He had been at this same log house the night Marta had delivered young Ten.

The muscles danced on Doc's whiskered cheeks. Then his lips moved. But no sound came. For some years, Doc had said the prayers for the first scattered settlers of Sun Bear Valley, but right now, Dal doubted that Doc was praying.

Suddenly Doc bent forward and squeezed one of young Ten's hands. Then he straightened and turned to Dal.

"I'll ride back and do a chore or two, Dal," he said huskily. "Don't do anythin' until I git back, huh? I won't be long."

Ten Baldwin took a fever. Dal and Mary watched the good Marta Carson at work. It was an anxious time for them.

Dal would have welcomed Doc at his side now.

Doc was always calm in a time of sickness or accident.

But Doc had not returned on time. Young Jim Baldwin returned with the team from the Carson place. Dal questioned him, but Jim had been too busy to notice whether or not Doc had left his home.

The evening was drawing in. Dal stepped out of doors. A wind had sprung up. It rustled the dry grass, and rubbed dry scrub together with sibilant hissing sound.

Suddenly Dal spun at the stamp of hoofs. He saw big Jud Morrison, his neighbor to the north, ride into the yard.

Morrison hit the ground and came up with long-legged strides.

"I just heard the news, Dal," Morrison said, his eyes wide under shaggy, iron-gray brows.

"How did you get the news, Jud?" Baldwin asked.

"Off Doc. Came across him just west of the big swamp an hour ago, Dal. Claimed he was scoutin' timber for a—a—"

Morrison broke off. Dal Baldwin had snorted through flared nostrils. His face was pale and red by turns as his eyes glistened.

No wonder Doc was late. The little neighbor had gone east alone!

"You—you know what might happen, Jud?" Dal asked, huskily, without glancing Jud's way. "He'll likely get killed!"

Dal loped toward the house. With a whispered word to Mary, he snatched down his rifle, slipped a box of cartridges into a hip pocket of his jeans and hurricaned on out of doors.

Jud Morrison had his rifle in its saddle scabbard. He had heard about the rustling of his steer and was ready for action.

"Unsaddle, Jud," Dal said sharply. "We'll ride bareback, so we can turn the horses loose later. They'll find their way back home. Hustle, or we may be too late!"

THEY struck the swamp. Suddenly Dal's nostrils quivered.

"Smoke, Jud! Smell it!"

It was time to dismount, turn their horses loose. There was fire ahead and somewhere ahead was little Doc Carson.

As Dal slapped his gelding on the rump, starting him off along the back trail, he was suddenly arrested by the loud, booming *whang-g-g* of Doc Carson's old rifle.

"Doc!" he gasped. "Come on, Jud!"

As they skirted the swamp, they saw sparks and smoke. The grass east of the swamp was a sea of flames. But Dal quickly sized up the situation. The fire seemed to be eating against the wind.

"Backfirin', Jud!" he called out. "It's Doc's work."

Again the old frontier rifle blasted. Then came two sharp shots from rifles of lighter caliber.

Dal started forward. He mounted the crest of a hogback ridge, and gasped as he saw, half a mile ahead, a fire of wide and ugly proportions.

"See, Jud. Those Cully jaspers touched off the fire. They got panicky and decided to hightail it, but first they figured they'd wipe us out. Let's go find Doc. His last shot sounded from over thataway." Dal swung, pointing.

As he led on, down along a shallow draw, Dal was quivering with admiration for Doc. Doc had wisely touched off a back fire which would hold the fire the Cullys had intended to wipe out the Sun Bear Valley settlers. Doc's backfire would turn the main red tide, nudging it into the edge of the marsh and lake to the southeast.

The creek would also check it.

But now Dal was filled with concern for his great friend. As he started to crawl up over the rim of the draw bank Dal ducked sharply.

"Hold it, Jud," he whispered hoarsely. "I see them—the Cullys. They're haided this way—either trapped between the backfire and the main fire or else they are comin' in for Doc."

"If you see 'em plain, throw down on

'em, Dal!" Jud said. "Shucks, man! They're just hellions. The law would uphold you!"

But Baldwin shook his head.

He parted a bush. Lying prone, he peered through a film of smoke. He saw the elder Cully drop to a knee, throw his Sharps to his cheek. Dal swung his own rifle up, but there was a loud booming explosion. Cully pitched forward to his face.

"Doc got him, Jud!" Dal gasped. "He—hold it! Young Cully has dropped into a draw. He's comin' in thisaway. Figures to take Doc from behind. Stand by. Try to git to Doc. I want young Cully."

Dal started to squirm through the brush. He had difficulty with his breathing as shifting wind brought puffs of acrid smoke into his face, his nostrils. But fortunately the prevailing wind had veered to turn the main smoke tide away on his right quarter.

Now in willows, atop another draw, his eyes narrowed as he saw Joe Cully's stocky form move toward his left. Dal could have shot him easily, but that was not what he wanted.

Cully was drawing nearer, nearer. Slowly Dal raised his rifle.

"Hold it, Cully!" he boomed. "I got you covered. Drop your rifle, or I'll squeeze this trigger. You'll git a slug plumb between your shoulders."

Cully hesitated.

DAL tipped up his Winchester's muzzle and pulled. Quickly he jerked the lever mechanism. Cully spun, his hands empty, and high.

Dal Baldwin rose and strode on down. Here was the hulker who had beaten up young Ten!

Dal watched his footing going down the slope of the draw. The sound of crackling brush and grass didn't disturb him, for he knew that the Cullys' plan to burn out Sun Bear Valley had been thwarted by Doc Carson and a timely shift of the prevailing wind.

Now in the draw bottom, he moved in with long-legged strides, a fever mounting in his brain as he stared into the big man's twisted face.

"I got you where I want you, mister," Dal said huskily. "I'm goin' to pay off. I'm not waitin' on the law—now."

"Easy, when you got a Winchester stuck in my belly," young Cully growled.

Dal suddenly let his rifle slide down his legs to the ground. Like lightning he rushed and struck. Both fists crashed to Cully's mouth. As the husky man toppled back, Dal lunged in and swung a terrific right hand to the side of the jaw.

Cully flattened, but he was turning. He was on his knees, shaking his head, when Dal suddenly saw his right hand flash to the haft of his large hunting knife—the same knife with which Cully had dressed out the antelope buck.

Snarling, Dal rushed, and kicked the knife into the brush.

Cully howled with pain. But he recovered and lunged. His shoulder hit Dal across the knees, knocking him back.

Dal was down. He felt a thumb working into his right eye.

Dal bridged his powerful, well-conditioned body, as he jerked his head to one side. Cully sagged slightly. Dal suddenly heaved and rolled, spilling the man.

Before Cully could recover, Dal had chopped savagely down with a work-hardened right hand. It connected flush to Joe Cully's nose.

Breathing hard, gasping out his hatred of this man, Dal rose. He stooped, grabbed the man by the shirt collar and dragged him bodily to his feet.

Dal heard voices, but nothing could stop him now as he smashed a looping left hand to Joe Cully's mouth. He held the rustler up and hooked him with another left.

"Give him the whole works, Dal!"

It was Doc Carson's voice.

Cully was rubbery at the knees, but suddenly he retrieved some spark of fight. He hooked up sharply with a knee which broke Dal's hold on him. Groaning, Dal tottered back. He saw his opponent only as a huge blur, but he shook his head and hurled himself in.

On top of the draw, Jud Morrison and Doc Carson watched—watched a father exact his toll of vengeance.

When at last Dal Baldwin staggered back, to lean heavily against a clump of willows, Doc Carson slid down the bank, and limped on up to his friend's side, slipping an arm about Dal's waist.

"Great, Dal! Gosh almighty! You were like a bayed cougar. You killed him deader than Jonah."

"N-no, Doc. He ain't dead," Dal said. "I didn't want to kill him. I want him to suffer a while, like young Ten is sufferin'. He— Listen! That horse hoofbeats?"

Deputy Marshal Frank Syme and a deputy rode to a halt at the draw top.

FORCING a grin to his pale face, Dal Baldwin waved a hand, and winced, for his knuckles were badly split.

Big Frank Syme dropped to the draw bottom, and slapped Baldwin's shoulder.

"Met the Deacon on my way down, Dal," he said. "Curry was ridin' with me and the deputy. He's to the house now. The young lad will be all right in less than a month."

Syme broke off. He turned, dropped to a knee beside the prone form of Joe Cully, and slid his fingers around the man's extended left wrist. Suddenly, he looked up at Dal, smiling.

"Okay. He'll live. Live to go to jail a spell. We caught up with the other one. Somebody had broke his right arm with a slug."

Little Doc Carson chuckled and spat testily, proudly. He smiled, displaying all his gold-capped teeth.

"It was old Betsy, Frank," he said boastfully. "Never knowed her to miss when I needed her most." He turned to Dal and winked.

"Wal, neighbor," he said huskily, "I reckon you can git along back to young Ten now. Leave the cleanin' up to us. Jud and I'll see the fire don't git out of hand; Frank and his deputy can look after the Cullys."

Dal forced a grin. He was batting his eyes, both of which were rheumy although Cully had only slightly injured one.

"Thanks—thanks, everybody, for uh—everything."

Joe Cully was stirring. Dal looked sharply down as the man rolled onto his back.

Joe Cully's face was not pretty, but Dal did not gloat. He had exacted payment. It was enough.

He now turned and moved up the draw. Alone, he strode on back—back to his home and, he most fervently hoped, peace to continue the harvest.

Suddenly his mouth twitched with a smile. He came to a halt and turned to stare back through the light smoke at the land east of the swamp.

"It'll be yours, Ten boy," he said huskily. "There can be no question about that now. Justice will take care of it—for you."

Heaving a big sigh, Dal wheeled and moved on to pick up the old creek trail. As he neared his cultivated land he quickened his pace. He was anxious to have Doc Curry's personal report on young Ten.

STEVE REESE AND HIS PARDS BATTLE COLORADO LAND HOGS IN

GUN BOSS OF RAWHIDE VALLEY

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

NEXT ISSUE'S EXCITING COMPLETE FULL-LENGTH NOVEL!

Mort Turner rides the vengeance trail home to Dry Wells in quest

The VALLEY of HATE

CHAPTER I

A Jailbird Comes Home

MORT TURNER eased the reins as his horse topped the rise east of Twin Aspen Pass. Cool wind coming up from the valley seemed heaven sent surcease after the flaming desert hell he had left six hours before.

Turner had known it would be cool at Twin Aspen. It always had been.

He pushed up the floppy brim of his old Stetson with the back of a bronzed hand. His face was lean, with hard lines that were discernible even beneath the stubble of a week's growth of beard.

Mort Turner might have been thirty or he might have been only twenty. Five years in the scorching inferno of sun-

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of the killer who railroaded him to prison for five bitter years!

Turner fired as the gunslick's right-hand gun roared

an action novelet by JOHN A. SAXON

baked Yuma prison had erased the indications of comparative age.

Turner's grim lips relaxed slightly.

Five years! Five years of hell. And somewhere in that seemingly peaceful valley spread below him was the man who had sent him to Yuma by lies. Jim Cantwell, boss of the Slash C ranch, the man who had dubbed Twin Aspen Valley "The Valley of Contentment."

He'd show Jim Cantwell what contentment meant. As far as he was concerned it had turned into the Valley of Hate. Turner had been convicted for manslaughter. That's what they had called it. Even yet he could hear the

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bitter voice of the prosecutor.

"Killed his best friend, gentlemen of the jury. Shot him in the back. Bill Winters, the man who raised him from a button. Turner knew that Winters had left him the Circle W in his will. You have heard the testimony of our esteemed townsman Jim Cantwell; how he heard the shot, saw this defendant with Bill Winters. . ."

Mort Turner had heard that shot too —but it hadn't come from his gun. He had fired a slug at the disappearing bushwhacker as the man ran away from the killing. That one bullet out of his gun had been a damning bit of circumstantial evidence.

FIVE YEARS he was gone. He knew he wouldn't get any welcome from the people of Dry Wells. They were still bitter, still dominated by Cantwell. Turner grinned as he thought of what the warden had told him before he was released from prison.

"Here's the money the state allows you, Turner," he said. "I know there's no use giving you advice. I never knew a man who had been here over a year who would take advice. They're always bitter. But I'll give it to you just the same. Stay away from Dry Wells. You're not wanted around there."

"You should have turned that letter face down," Turner told the warden, pointing to a letter on a desk. "The one Cantwell sent you. I can see it from here, with the Slash C printed on it. Thanks for the advice, just the same."

The prison official shook his head slowly. "Then you won't be taking my advice, I guess," the warden said.

"I'm not sayin'," Mort answered. "Seems like I've read somewhere about this bein' a free country. I don't owe the state anything, do I?"

"Nope."

"Any law you know of that could stop me from goin' back to Dry Wells if I wanted to?"

"You're a fool if you do," the warden snapped angrily.

"Maybe." Turner laughed evilly.

The town of Dry Wells hadn't changed much in those five years, Turner thought. There was a new coat of paint across the false front of the General Mercantile store. Andy Hill had invested in a new red and white pole for the front of the town barber shop. The same sort of sway-hipped cow ponies stood dejectedly in front of the Lone Star Saloon. The street was practically deserted.

As Mort Turner rode up to the hitch-rail in front of the saloon, a broad-shouldered, black-haired man wearing a white Stetson, stepped through the swinging doors, looked disinterestedly in Turner's direction for a moment, then froze, as grim recognition flooded into his eyes.

Turner slid stiffly out of the saddle, settled the gun that rode at his hip, took a step or two toward the saloon, and stopped abruptly.

"Well, Cantwell," Mort asked icily, "you think I've changed much?"

"Turner," said the other man, in apparent disbelief, "I wouldn't have thought you'd have the nerve."

"Why not? Any law against it?" Turner shrugged.

"No," said Cantwell pointedly, his black eyes narrowing to little slits, "but there is a law against an ex-convict packing a gun in this man's town."

Turner's face suddenly whitened, Cantwell stood with his huge bulk blocking the door. Then he said, loudly:

"Kramer. There's a gent out here aimin' to do a little business with the law. Better have a look."

Sheriff Ed Kramer, a black cigar clamped between yellow, stained teeth, a six-pointed star dangling from the pocket of a flannel shirt, shoved through the doors and stood beside Cantwell. When he saw Turner his jaw sagged.

"Howdy, Sheriff," said Turner flatly. "I'll be turnin' this gun over to you. I might get a notion to go shootin' rattlers with it." He looked at Cantwell as he said that.

"That kind of talk won't get you anywhere, Turner," said the boss of the

Slash C. "You'd better take my advice and high-tail it out of here. You ain't wanted in this valley."

"I judged that by the letter you sent the warden at Yuma," Turner countered raspily. "I happen to own some property here in Twin Aspen Valley. Suppose you try and find a law that'll keep me off it."

THE SHERIFF looked worried.

"Now look, Mort," he began, as though it hadn't been five years since he had last spoken to Turner. "You don't want any trouble, I know, and you understand how folks around here feel. Why don't you—"

"I know how some of 'em feel," interrupted Turner, looking straight at Cantwell.

"You'd better remain on that spread if you go up there," Cantwell said pointedly.

"Maybe so," agreed Turner, with an exasperating grin. "By the way, Cantwell," he added, "that law about ex-convicts carryin' guns don't apply to rifles."

He jerked his head meaningly toward a Winchester booted on the saddle of his mount.

"All right, Turner," Cantwell snapped angrily. "If you've come back here lookin' for trouble, you'll find it."

"I came back to find the man who killed Bill Winters," said Turner. "When I do, then there'll be trouble—not before."

While he talked he unbuckled his gun-belt, handed the six-shooter to the sheriff.

"Keep her oiled up for me," he told the officer. "Somehow I reckon I'll be usin' that gun on a rattler one of these days."

The sheriff shook his head. "Cantwell is right, Turner," he said. "You shouldn't have come back here to the valley. Folks around here don't forget easy."

"Neither do I," returned Mort Turner bitterly. "I came back here to collect a debt, Kramer. Somebody owes me for five years of hell in Yuma, and somebody is goin' to pay!"

Another man, tall, lanky, red-haired, stepped out of the saloon then. It was Les Cotton, Kramer's deputy. He stared at Turner as though he had seen a ghost.

"Well, I'll be dad-blamed," he said slowly. "You got a lot of nerve."

"That just about makes it unanimous, Les," said Turner. "I got a lot of nerve, so let it go at that. Meantime, don't any of you gents get over-friendly and pay me visits up on the spread after dark."

"Don't flatter yourself, Turner," Cantwell said. "You'll be left just about as much alone as a skunk."

Les Cotton had taken the gun from Kramer, and stood with the belt dangling in his hand.

"I might have knowed you'd do something like this, Mort," he said protestingly. "Millie King told me just last night she bet you'd be back."

Millie King! Memories of her raced through Turner's mind. Now he knew why he had come back! The reason had been largely Millie King. It was mostly in her eyes that he wanted to justify himself. Jail-bird. That's what he was. How could he even talk to Millie or anybody else until he had cleared up forever the mystery of Bill Winters' death.

"I still figure you made a mistake in comin' back," the sheriff said, breaking into his thoughts, "but as long as you obey the law I don't know any way to stop you from goin' up to the Circle W."

"There'll be a way," Cantwell cut in angrily. "You might as well make up your mind, Mort Turner, that we ain't goin' to have you livin' and breathin' in the same air as decent people."

HAVING thus declared himself, the boss of Twin Aspen Valley turned around haughtily, and went back into the saloon, his face livid with anger. For a moment Turner stood there.

"You've made yourself a bad enemy, Mort," said the sheriff, shaking his grizzled head sadly.

"You sure have," echoed Les Cotton, expressing, however, not the slightest indication of displeasure over the fact. "Jim Cantwell just about runs this country. If he says you can't stay—you can't stay."

Then the two men turned and reentered the saloon.

For a long minute Turner stood watching the swinging doors. It didn't surprise him that the lawmen backed up the ultimatum of the boss of the Slash C. Cantwell did run things in the valley.

Then he turned around and faced the street once more. What was the use? The cards were stacked against him. He was one man bucking not only Jim Cantwell, but a solid wall of public opinion as well.

Wearily, he mounted his horse and started out of town toward the north. Engrossed in his own troubles he failed to notice the slim blonde girl who ran out of the Bon Ton Millinery just as he passed. Although he seemed to be looking straight at her, he saw only dank mists boiling up out of the darkness of hot nights.

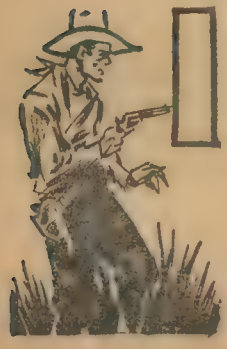
Millie King raised her arm, seemed about to cry out a greeting, then slowly lowered her hand as the rider went by.

"He looked right at me," whispered the girl to herself. "Looked right at me—and never said a word."

There was a suspicion of moisture in her eyes as she went back into the shop.

CHAPTER II

Dangerous Visitor



IT WAS dusk when Mort Turner rode down through the clearing to his little spread on Mason Creek, the place left to him in the will of Bill Winters. In the half light he could see the sturdy log cabin he and Winters had built while he was still a youngster.

He went over to a flat rock fifty yards from the house now, turned it over and brought out a rusty key. The lock squeaked as he forced it open. He was home at last. With a grateful sigh he shoved the door open and went in.

Somehow the place seemed different. He didn't remember leaving things just as they were now. Some sixth sense warned him and he wished that he had the Winchester on the saddle of his horse in his hands.

"Hands up, Turner!" a voice commanded. Slowly he raised his arms, clenched fists shoulder high. "You and me's got to make medicine talk."

In the gloom of the shuttered room Turner couldn't see the speaker but there was something familiar about that voice.

As his eyes became accustomed to the shadow, Turner saw a stocky, gray-haired man of forty-five, whose eyes were squinted to mere slits. He came from behind the kitchen door, a six-shooter in his hand. Turner recognized him.

"Buck Hale!" he said softly. "Then you did get away. They said you were drowned while makin' your escape."

Hale smiled. "Yep, I fooled 'em," he said. "Got a slug in my shoulder, after I dived off the cliff. Them Yuma prison guards need some brushin' up on their shootin."

"Buck" Hale was a killer, an all-around bad man. Turner allowed his pent-up breath to exhale slowly.

"What you doin' here?" he asked.

Hale grinned mirthlessly.

"Remember the day you got confidential down in Yuma and told me about this place?" he asked. "When I made it to the California side of the river I headed for here. I knowed there was grub and that a man could hide out here as long as he wanted. Plenty of canned goods under the floor, you told me. I kill me a calf now and then over on the Slash C and I been gettin' along plenty good for three months."

"But how did you get in?" Turner

asked, puzzled. "The shutters are still up and the lock wasn't busted."

The other smiled knowingly.

"I'd be plumb crazy to bust the lock and tip off every passerby that somebody had been in the house," said Hale. "I just dug under the back part of the house and then loosened a board or two."

Hale had put up his gun now and slouched into a chair, aware of the fact that Turner was unarmed.

"You and me'll get along first rate, Turner," he said evenly. "We can use this place for a headquarters an' between us we can build up a nice little herd. Nobody'll think of lookin' for me out here."

Turner stood in the doorway, not having moved except to lower his hands when the escaped convict put up his gun. Turner could visualize the trouble that would arise should the presence of the escaped convict become known. He would be harboring an escaped criminal and would possibly be returned to Yuma with Hale.

Apparently Hale sensed what was going through Turner's head. He grinned evilly.

"Better not try turnin' me in, fella," the killer said. "If I go back to Yuma, you'll go along, too—if you live."

There was a world of meaning in Hale's threat. Turner remembered some of the tales he had heard from some other convicts in the prison. Hale was reputedly one of the worst killers ever to come to the penitentiary.

Hale grinned. "You wouldn't want to go back to Yuma now, would you? Remember how hot she is and the smell of the river . . ."

TURNER'S teeth clicked together viciously.

"Shut up!" he snapped. "You needn't worry about my tryin' to turn you in."

Hale nodded wisely. "Now you're talkin' sense, Turner."

And there they left it, an armed truce, although most of the armament was on the side of Buck Hale.

For the next two or three days Turner busied himself getting things tidied up around the house. He cleaned and scrubbed, often to the accompaniment of Buck Hale's sneers.

"Anybody'd think you were expectin' company," he chortled, "the way you're shinin' the place up."

Turner glared at him, fire in his eyes, then went back to scrubbing the floor again with renewed vigor. Hale laughed, went out, got on his horse and rode away.

Two hours later he was back again with the carcass of a calf.

"Veal for supper, cookie," Hale taunted him. He chuckled mirthlessly. "Nice Slash C stuff," he said, looking sharply at Turner. "What the devil! Cantwell will never miss it."

It was on the tip of Turner's tongue to argue the point, but he knew argument would be useless.

"You're borrowin' trouble," was all he said, shaking his head. "Cantwell hates me. I had a run-in with him the day I came back. They're goin' to keep an eye on this place and they might get the idea there's some Slash C beef over here."

Hale didn't seem impressed. "I wouldn't worry too much about that," he said, biting off a chew of tobacco. "Jim Cantwell may be runnin' Twin Aspen Valley, but he ain't runnin' me."

And without further comment, Buck Hale set himself to the task of cutting up the carcass of the calf.

For several days there was no sign of any of the Slash C riders or of their boss Jim Cantwell. Turner began to wonder whether Cantwell's threat to drive him off the range hadn't been just a bluff. Events were shaping up so that he was going to have to test that question pretty shortly. Despite the fact that there had been a goodly supply of canned stores under the floor, Buck Hale cut into them pretty deeply during the course of his sojourn on the Circle W.

Turner saddled his horse one day and

announced his intention of going into town for supplies. At least that was what he told Hale. In his heart he knew that the real reason was a desire to see and talk with Millie.

"You wouldn't be figurin' on doin' any gabbin' with the sheriff while you happen to be in town, would you?" Hale asked, his eyes slitting as he watched Turner preparing to leave.

"Don't talk foolish," Turner said.

Buck Hale didn't seem much concerned over the possibilty of being seen on the Circle W. He had been hiding out at the ranchhouse for months before Turner's arrival, and according to his story he had exerted every effort not to be seen. It seemed rather strange to Turner that Hale did not seem much worried now.

Turner loped his horse along the trail, planning to reach Dry Wells before noon. But he figured without the breaks of the trail. Halfway into town his mount went lame and he had not only to slow down, but lead the horse for a long distance. He determined, in view of the animal's condition, to use Rattlesnake Pass into town. It was a rough piece of trail, hardly more than a cattle path, but it cut across the lower end of the Slash C property and shortened the distance into town by three miles.

The lameness of the horse having disappeared to some extent, he mounted again and crossed Triunfo Creek.

Then he pulled the horse to a stop. He understood now why Buck Hale had manifested so little concern over the power of Jim Cantwell—why he had made the remark that Cantwell might run the valley but he couldn't boss him. Beneath a low-branched oak, engrossed in confidential talk, stood Buck Hale and Jim Cantwell!

MORT TURNER'S teeth clicked together sharply as he saw the pair. It was plain Cantwell all along had known about Buck Hale and where he was hiding. He thought he understood several things now. One of them was how Cantwell proposed to run him, Turner, out of the valley. However, the plan might be double-edged. Cantwell couldn't accuse Turner of harboring a criminal without involving himself. Even Jim Cantwell's influence wouldn't be enough to keep Hale from being returned to Yuma. Plainly Hale had some hold over Cantwell, and if he went back to prison, he would talk.

Turner's eyes narrowed.

While riding toward Dry Wells, Mort Turner patched together a pretty good picture of Jim Cantwell's plans. The thing that puzzled him more than anything else, however, was why Cantwell manifested so much dislike for him. True, Cantwell and Bill Winters had never been friendly. True also, Cantwell had at one time ordered Turner not to cross the lower end of the Slash C on his way to town. But that had been years ago—long before the trouble which resulted in Turner going to Yuma Prison.

It was Saturday afternoon, and Dry Wells was pretty well crowded, when Turner finally arrived there. Turner had figured on getting into town about noon, but because of the delay caused by the lameness of his horse, it was nearly three o'clock when he rode down the middle of the very dusty street.

He hitched his horse at the rail in front of the Mercantile Store, stepped up on the sidewalk. Men who had known him since he was a kid turned away. Others looked as though they were going to speak, but didn't.

He went into the Mercantile and walked up to the counter. Hal Bettner, the clerk, who had gone to school with Turner looked at him dully.

"Yes, sir," he said, in a most impersonal way. "Something I can do for you?"

It had been on the tip of Turner's tongue to call him by name, but he bit off the impulse in time.

"I want half a dozen cans of tomatoes, a ham, and twenty-five pounds of spuds," he told Bettner coldly.

"Yes, sir," replied the clerk. When

the articles were on the counter, Bettner said, "That'll be fifteen dollars."

Turner's eyes flashed angrily. "Why?"

"Because," cut back the clerk, "that's our price. Take it or leave it. There's certain folks we don't care to sell to. Their presence makes it unpleasant for other customers."

Mort Turner reached across the counter, got Bettner by the collar and jerked him head first out into the center of the store, while the customers in the place scattered into the clear.

"So that's the dirty way you folks are goin' to play Jim Cantwell's game, is it?" Turner stormed, as he slapped Hal across the face with his open hand. "Chargin' me more than double price!"

"Now look, Mort," replied the other. "I don't want any trouble with you."

THERE was a commotion at the door and Les Cotton shoved his way into the store.

"What's goin' on here, Turner?" he demanded angrily.

"I'm teaching him manners," Turner answered, shoving Bettner aside.

"You're fightin'," Les Cotton said meaningly. "I got orders to lock you up if you cause trouble."

Hal Bettner was quick to follow up Cotton's lead. "He assaulted me—he struck me."

Les Cotton pulled his gun.

"I'm takin' you in, Mort," he said loudly. "On a charge of disturbin' the peace."

Mort Turner looked Cotton straight in the eyes.

"Put up that gun, Les," he said. "Use some sense."

People were scrambling to get out of the line of trouble. The deputy scowled.

"You're resistin' an officer, Turner," he said. "Put up your hands."

Turner yanked the gun out of Les Cotton's hand. But as he did so, the cocked gun roared its thunder and a slug smacked down harmlessly into the floor.

The sound of the shot brought other men running in from the street.

One of the men who came in off the street was Lew Taylor, one of the Slash C outfit. When he saw the gun in Turner's hand his own fist slapped down for the six-shooter at his hip.

Mort Turner knew Taylor, knew that such a move on his part meant business. There was but one thing for him to do and he did it. The gun in his hand belched flame and the bullet tore angrily into Taylor's shoulder. The Slash C rider dropped the gun, cursing. Turner circled around him, made the door, and got out on the walk.

"I'm sorry I had to plug you, Taylor," he told the wounded man, "but you're too hasty with a gun."

"You won't get away with this, Mort," Taylor shouted.

"A body would think I was a lobo, the treatment I've got from everybody," Turner retorted hotly. "Well, all right. If that's the way you want it let her ride thataway."

Les Cotton, backed against one of the cases inside the store, had raised his hands shoulder high, a move that was purely voluntary.

"They'll run you out of the country now, Mort Turner," he said as though mouthing a delicious morsel. Turner knew why the deputy hated him. Les Cotton felt he would then have a free field with Millie King, despite the fact in five years he hadn't been able to make any progress with the girl.

Mort Turner was in a tight fix. The only horse at the hitch-rail was his lame horse. They would run him down in half an hour. Yet it was his only chance and he took it. He backed across the walk, forked the animal and galloped out of town.

Before he had gone more than a quarter of a mile he knew they'd catch him before he made the timber at the foot of the mountains. He prodded the animal for all it was worth, yet behind him he could see a rising cloud of dust that marked the coming of a hastily formed posse.

MORT TURNER had been a fool. He knew it now. He had lost his temper, played directly into the hands of Jim Cantwell. He knew that if Cantwell had planned the whole affair himself he couldn't have done it better.

There were two roads out of town. One the path Mort had followed; the other, the wagon road that was slightly longer but joined up with the trail two miles north of town. He could see some one seated in a rig, sending the two-horse team furiously up the wagon trail after him.

Turner still had the gun he had taken from Les Cotton. Well, if they wanted fight, he'd give 'em a fight. He knew the wagon was going to head him off, but he had to take a chance.

As he came closer he realized that there was only one person in the rig, a girl. She was lashing the horses to top speed and when she was only a hundred yards away he knew who it was. Millie King!

She jerked the wagon to a sudden stop.

"Quick, Mort," she said breathlessly. "I heard them talking before the trouble. They planned to make a scene of some kind so Les Cotton could put you under arrest. I saw your horse, realized that it was lame, and brought the team."

He jumped off his horse, climbed into the rig, and gathered up the reins she handed him.

"You did that for me, Millie?" he said, as though it were hard to believe. "Don't you realize what it will mean to you? You've thrown in with the man the whole valley hates, the man to whom Hal Bettner wouldn't even sell grub. The man Jim Cantwell railroaded into prison and is tryin' to run out of the valley. You'd better let me go on afoot, double back to town before they get here."

She looked at him with tear-filled eyes. "You're wasting precious time, Mort," she said calmly. "I thought about all that before I took the rig. I'm sticking by you." There was a trace of a smile on her lips. "I'm liable to be called a horsethief. That's Lige Hudkins' team, I borrowed."

He looked at her for an instant, then kissed her briefly. "And the rest of 'em wouldn't even speak to me, honey, he said. "How come—"

"How come you didn't give me a chance, Mort Turner?" she interrupted him, her eyes shining bravely. "Now use the whip on the team or we'll both land in jail."

CHAPTER III

Murder!

AS HE urged the horses along the wagon road toward the hills, Turner knew that the respite afforded by the girl's arrival with the rig was only temporary. Four miles further up the wagon road ended and there was only a rough trail through the hills. There, all wagon traffic had to go around by way of Bear Canyon. He realized too, that the men following were as well aware of the fact as he was himself.

"Millie," he said huskily, "you shouldn't have done it."

"There isn't anything they can do to me, Mort," she assured him. "They don't know I picked you up, and I'll tell them that I borrowed the rig to see the excitement and that the horses ran away with me."

"You—you'd lie for me, Millie?"

She looked squarely at him. "Would you do less for me, Mort?"

His free arm encircled her, as he reined the horses in. They had a good five minutes lead on the posse.

"They won't believe you," he pointed out.

"I know it."

"I'll clear myself some day, Millie," he said. "You know I didn't kill old Bill, don't you?"

"I know you didn't."

He started for the brush, then hesitated as she called to him.

"Watch out for Les Cotton, Mort," she warned him. "There's something between Les and Jim Cantwell that isn't all on the surface."

She turned the team around, started back for Dry Wells.

Turner cursed Cantwell again. Something between Cantwell and Cotton; something between Cantwell and Hale. Every trail seemed to lead toward Cantwell and yet the boss of the Slash C was the one man out of all the valley that Turner knew had not fired the shot that killed Bill Winters. He had seen Cantwell at the time the shot was fired and knew that the range boss was not the man who fired the shot.

There was but one thing he could do now, make his way over the mountain to the Circle W and enlist the aid of Buck Hale.

He smiled grimly as he fought his way through the rocks. The tables were turned now. He would have to get help from Hale, thus throwing himself entirely in league with the escaped killer. But for Millie, he didn't care what happened now. They wanted to make an outlaw of him. He knew he hadn't killed old Bill, but if they all thought he had . . .

He waited until dark before he approached the cabin on the Circle W. He reconnoitered carefully to observe whether the posse had come up to the spread looking for him. The fact that they hadn't done so seemed more than strange. However, satisfied that the place was not being watched, he approached the house, shoved open the door and went in. He hesitated about striking a match, calling softly to Hale before he did so. There was no answer. Hale was probably out on the range somewhere.

He flicked the match on the heel of his boot, shaded it with his hands. Abruptly, he sucked in his breath in alarm. There was good reason why Buck Hale hadn't answered. Buck Hale was sprawled on the floor of the living room —dead! The bullet that killed him, Turner saw immediately, had been fired from the rear. Buck Hale, gun-slick, killer, hadn't even had a chance to defend himself.

TURNER sensed what was going to happen now. Cantwell knew of the presence of Buck Hale; Turner had seen them talking together that afternoon. Hale was an escaped convict from Yuma. He would be found, identified, and Turner would be charged with the murder.

His eyes went into a tight frown. The killing of Buck Hale hadn't just happened. It was something that had been carefully planned—and timed. The only slip in the plan had been in the fact that no one seemed to have figured that Turner would have the audacity to return to the ranch before high-tailing it out of the country after the trouble in Dry Wells.

Again, Mort Turner could see the fine hand of the boss of the Slash C—Jim Cantwell.

He lit another match, stared more closely at the dead man. Hale had been shot in the back, and apparently had not died instantly. He had tried to bring his gun into play after being shot. He had gotten it into his hand but evidently hadn't been able to shoot it. His right hand was gripped around the barrel in such a way that he had been holding the gun upside down.

Then, upon closer inspection, Turner knew why. The bandit had tried to leave a message. He had used the front sight of the gun to scratch something upon the floor.

Mort lit another match, found the lamp, lighted it. Gone now was all concern about being watched. He wanted to figure out what the convict had scratched on the bare boards.

BANK
TO

Mort Turner made a queer sucking

intake of breath. Supposing the deal between Cantwell and Hale had involved the bank. Cantwell controlled the bank!

That message was a warning of some sort, he decided, but did the first two letters of the unfinished last word mean "today" or "tonight" or "tomorrow?" Buck Hale had tried to leave a warning, but was that warning intended for him or for somebody else? Supposing the bank was to be robbed? Everybody who had a dollar in the little town of Dry Wells had it in Jim Cantwell's bank.

Well, what did he care? What were the people of Dry Wells to him? They had treated him like an outcast, not a man among them had taken his part, believed him in his innocence, or had even given him a chance to prove it.

Then he remembered Hank Wilson. Hank was getting old. Every week he drew five dollars out of the Bank of Dry Wells. There were others, too, who had their life savings in that bank.

He thought of the sheriff, of Les Cotton. If he went back to town and gave that warning, it would mean his own arrest. Then, supposing nothing did happen. Supposing Buck Hale's last message meant something else?

Turner cursed under his breath, went out to the corral and got Buck Hale's horse. Evidently the dead man had sensed danger and planned to try to get away, for the bay was tied to the corral fence, saddled and ready to ride. Hale had even fastened bed-rolls to the back of the cantle and to the saddle horn.

Mort Turner left the blanket wrapped possessions of the dead man where they were on the saddle as he unfastened the bay's reins and swung into leather. He wheeled the horse and headed for town.

He hadn't gone more than a mile in the direction of Dry Wells when he heard the hoofbeats of horses coming from ahead of him along the road. Two riders loomed into view, and though he could not recognize them in the distance he sensed they were two of Jim Cantwell's Slash C riders.

Turner tried to ride off the road before the men saw him, but one of them uttered a shout and he realized he was too late. He rode back across a stretch of wild, rocky country, then swiftly dismounted and stood, waiting near some big rocks, gun in hand.

"There he is—get him!" shouted one of the cowpunchers as they rode toward him. "I'm betting it is Turner, and he's a wanted man."

Turner fired a warning shot over the men's heads as a signal for them to keep away. He had no desire to shoot it out with these two in a roaring gunfight. But apparently they were out to get him. Perhaps someone in town had offered a reward for his capture and these two men intended to try and collect.

The nearest man leaped out of his saddle. He wore two guns and they flashed into his hands as he went into a gunman's crouch. Turner fired just as the gunslick's right hand Colt roared. A bullet whistled by Turner's left ear. He saw the two-gun man's hat fly off, saw the man stagger, then pitch forward on his face to sprawl there motionless.

Behind Turner a third horseman appeared, gun in hand. A third shot from Turner's gun nicked the second rider. Even though he had his gun drawn the cowpuncher wheeled his horse and rode away from there fast.

The third man fired—his bullet missing Turner by inches. Turner shot for the fourth time—but the third man had lost interest in continuing the battle alone. He sent his horse racing in the direction the second waddy had gone.

"I better get out of here fast," Turner muttered, as he swiftly reloaded his gun and then went to his horse and swung into the saddle. "Those two might come back."

HE again headed for the town, and when he reached it he entered Dry Wells through a back street, carefully avoiding being seen. Millie King lived

in the back part of her shop. He'd go there, let her carry the warning to the sheriff, then he'd be on his way.

There was a light in the tiny parlor that Millie maintained as part of her quarters in the rear of the Bon Ton Millinery shop. Turner crept up to the window, intending to rap on the glass, and have Millie open the back door.

With his hand raised to tap on the glass he froze in his tracks. The shade was partly up and he could hear voices. One of them was the voice of a man, Les Cotton. For a moment the heart of Mort Turner almost stopped beating. It was inconceivable that Millie King could be really interested in Cotton.

He cursed himself, for even harboring the thought, then listened, shamelessly. Les Cotton was drunk. Not only that but his arm was around Millie's waist and she was making no effort to move it. Turner hadn't heard ten words before he knew why. Millie was encouraging Les Cotton to talk, and her reason for letting him do so was perfectly apparent. He was talking about Mort Turner.

"Mort Turner never was any good, Millie," Cotton was saying. "Told you that all along. Look at 'im now. He's owl-hoot meat. He'll wind up on cottonwood limb. Only real folks in the valley are me and my dad."

Mort frowned at that because Les Cotton was supposedly an orphan. He had been raised by an oldster out on Wine Creek, a man who called himself "Frenchy" Ward, but who had steadfastly denied that any relation existed between himself and Les Cotton.

"Gosh!" Les exclaimed. "Gotta go, Millie. I'm late. Supposed to look at the bank at ten o'clock. Marry me, Millie, and you can have anything you want. I'll buy you anything. Look!"

He shoved his hand into his coat, brought out a sheaf of bills. They were new, still in the wrapper.

"Where'd you get that money, Les Cotton?" the girl asked him, as he clumsily patted her shoulder. "There must be a thousand dollars there."

Les Cotton winked meaningly.

"Secret, Millie," he said heavily. "I'll tell you when we get married."

She let him out the back door.

"Millie!" Mort Turner called, when he was certain he wouldn't be heard by Les Cotton.

SHE was startled, then ran to the window and opened it. "Mort," she cried. "You *must* do something. Les Cotton has been here—"

"Yes, I know," he cut in.

"But you don't," she returned. "He's got a lot of money and there's something wrong at the bank. He wasn't quite drunk enough to tell me what, but I know something is going to happen."

The bank! That's what Hale's warning had read, and added to what Cotton had told Millie. The time Hale had tried to indicate must have been tonight.

"Stay here, Millie," Turner ordered her. "Don't leave the house under any condition. I'll be back."

He turned and sped into the street. Everything seemed peaceful enough. There was no one in sight. A broad fan of yellow light streamed out of the doors of the Lone Star Saloon. Les Cotton had disappeared.

Mort Turner hesitated momentarily, then walked rapidly across the street toward the entrance of the Lone Star.

Mort Turner stepped inside the saloon, moved to one side of the doors, and waited until his eyes became more accustomed to the light. The place was full of men. Spirals of tobacco smoke wormed their way through the low rafters of the ceiling.

Les Cotton was standing at the bar, a glass of whisky in his hand.

"You fellas drink my good health," he said loudly. "Goin' to get married, I am. Goin' to get married and go East."

"Cotton!"

The single word coming from the lips of Mort Turner fairly crackled through the smoke laden air. Conversation stopped as though a wire had been cut. Cotton turned slowly, his eyes bleary.

"So's you," he said thickly. "You're under arres'. Resistin' officer. I'm officer."

Turner came closer, watching the other men warily. "You're drunk, Cotton," he said tightly. "And when you're drunk, you talk too much."

For the first time Turner noticed Sheriff Kramer. "Maybe he's drunk, Turner," said the sheriff, "but I'm not. Put up your hands!"

"I've got to talk to you, Kramer," Turner said, ignoring the command.

"You heard what sheriff said, didn't you?" yelled Cotton.

Turner, believing the other too drunk to consider, had turned his back on Cotton. It was a foolish move. The deputy had pulled his gun, was leveling it as he turned. He saw the drunken man's finger tighten on the trigger as his own gun flashed into his hand. He threw himself sideways as the gun in the deputy's hand blazed, and the bullet tore through the fleshy part of his left arm.

"Drop that gun, Cotton," he yelled, as he saw the muzzle move in his direction a second time.

But Cotton didn't obey, and almost instinctively Turner fired. He hadn't meant to shoot to kill, but Les Cotton, lurching drunkenly as he shot again, moved squarely into the path of the bullet. It struck him full in the chest.

CHAPTER IV

Vindicated

TURNER was on his feet instantly. He backed against the bar. Flat on the floor, Les Cotton was gasping for breath and spouting blood.

"The first man to go for a gun draws lead!" he shouted at the crowd. "Stand back!" He went down on one knee beside Cotton, eyeing the crowd warily all the time. "What about the bank, Les?" he asked. "What did you try to tell Millie."

The dying man's eyes blazed with hate.

"There, Mort Turner," he said huskily. "You've killed me. I figured I'd get you first some day, like I got old man Winters. Only real people—in valley—me and my dad . . ."

His lips moved but no sound came. No sound was needed for Mort Turner could tell what the dying man said. The name he had given as the name of his father was—Jim Cantwell!

Turner stood up wearily. "I've got something to tell you, Sheriff," he said, then stopped short as a volley of shots ripped through the night air. And suddenly, a muffled explosion shook the town. "The bank," somebody shouted. "They're robbin' the bank!"

As one man, the crowd rushed to the street. And as one man they halted under a fusillade of shots from across the street. Four men came through the shattered front of the bank, mounted their horses and rode off before the astonished citizens could do more than catch their breath.

Turner stood stock still. Before his eyes, he could see six letters scratched on the board floor of his home on the Circle W. That was what Buck Hale had meant, but how did Buck Hale know?

"I'll get a posse together, men," the sheriff shouted. "We'll follow."

Turner ran to the sheriff's side.

"Kramer," he said, "I'm not running away and we'll settle our trouble later. Let somebody else lead the posse after those men. You come with me. I'll show you something, and then I'll take you to somebody who can tell you some more. Help me lift Les Cotton's body into the back room."

When the still form of the deputy was laid on the rickety couch in the room that served the proprieter of the saloon as an office, Mort Turner shoved his hand inside the deputy's coat, brought

out the money Cotton had showed Millie. There was a band around it stamped $5,000.

"Jumpin' wildcats," the sheriff muttered awedly. "Where did Les get that much money? New bills, too. Say—you don't suppose that's part of the bank money?"

"You always know when the express shipments come in, Kramer," Turner said evenly. "Did they bring in any money today?"

"I'll say they did," the sheriff exclaimed. "Twenty-five thousand dollars." His eyes opened wide. "And it was currency, too. Say, how do you explain all this, Turner!"

Mort Turner motioned with his hand. "Come on, Kramer," he said. "We're ridin'."

"Where?"

"Out to the Slash C," was the terse reply.

As they galloped along, Kramer plied Turner with questions, but he received no answer.

"I'm only playin' a hunch, Sheriff," Turner said. "If I'm wrong—that's my hard luck. How's business been with the Slash C the last few years?"

KRAMER shook his head sadly. "It's been pretty bad with everybody," he admitted. "Includin' the Cantwell outfit. Why?"

"Is the Slash C mortgaged?"

"It's supposed to be. Look, Mort"—Turner smiled at the sheriff's familiarity—"you ain't tanglin' with Cantwell, are you? You've got enough trouble on your hands."

A grim smile was Turner's reply.

It was midnight when they rode up to the Slash C ranchhouse. There was a single light burning inside, and as the sheriff started for the door, Turner stopped him.

"I learned somethin' tonight lookin' in a window," he whispered. "Suppose we try it again."

They approached the window, peered under the shade. Jim Cantwell was packing some clothes in an old-fashioned valise.

"I reckon there's part of your answer," said Turner. "Now let's go in."

Jim Cantwell himself came to the door, a gun in his hand. He saw the sheriff, but didn't see Mort Turner, who had stepped aside. He put up the gun.

"Come in, Kramer," he invited. "What's on your mind?" Then for the first time he saw Turner. "What are you doin' here, Turner," he said in stark surprise.

"Goin' travelin', Cantwell?" Turner asked, looking him square in the eyes.

"Over to El Paso, if it's any of your business," the Slash C boss answered angrily.

Turner risked everything on one throw. He was pretty sure of himself, but now he took a long chance. He flipped his gun out of his belt with a swift movement, covered Jim Cantwell.

"Take a look in the valise, Sheriff," he said. "Reckon Cantwell won't object."

But Cantwell did object, strenuously. As the sheriff hesitatingly moved toward the valise, Cantwell flung himself between the officer and the traveling bag.

"What's the idea, Kramer," he bellowed. "You sidin' this jailbird?"

Kramer wavered. After all, Jim Cantwell was the big man of the county, no matter what proof Mort Turner might think he had.

"You sure, Mort?" he asked uncertainly.

"Get away from the valise, Cantwell," Turner ordered, moving the gun menacingly.

His gaze contorted into a black visage of rage, Cantwell moved aside.

"You'll go back to Yuma for this!" he snarled.

"If I do, I'll have company," Turner said icily. "Open the bag, Sheriff!"

As Kramer moved forward, Cantwell did the unexpected. He made no attempt to go for his own gun, but snatched one of the sheriff's six-shooters, firing as he turned.

It was split second work, and doomed

to inaccuracy by the very speed of it. Turner, standing with his feet wide apart, had the edge, but even with the advantage he had to shoot rapidly against the whirling shot of Jim Cantwell. So fast was Cantwell's gun speed that even as Turner's bullet tore into his throat, he fired a second time. The slug burned the side of Turner's face.

"Open the valise," Turner repeated calmly, as if nothing had happened.

The sheriff did as he was bid. He reached in and brought out package after package of currency.

"Good gravy!" he gasped. "Cantwell robbed his own bank and then had a phony raid staged to make it seem like someone else did it."

"Cantwell had that money out of the bank hours before his hired help put on their show," Mort Turner added. "If you'll look at the serial numbers of those bills, Sheriff, you'll see that they're right in line with those bank notes that we took out of Les Cotton's pocket after he died."

LIFE was ebbing from the big body of Jim Cantwell rapidly, but his already pale face went whiter.

"What's that?" he choked out. "Les is dead?"

Turner nodded.

"Les is dead, Cantwell," he said. "Before he died he talked—plenty. He told me who his father was; how his father gave him the money we found in his pocket; how his father framed up things with Buck Hale. But most important of all, he told me who killed Bill Winters."

It was bluff, pure and simple, based on some knowledge and a lot of surmise, but Cantwell never questioned it. "Les Cotton always was a fool," he said unsteadily, "even if he was my son."

"I never knowed you had a son, Jim," said the sheriff, surprised.

"Nobody did," was the reply, "but Frenchy. His mother was Frenchy's daughter. I gave him five thousand dollars today—told him to get out of town. He didn't have sense enough to do it." He was having difficulty in breathing. Then: "Always was a fool. Crazy about that King girl. That's why he killed old man Winters, so Turner would be blamed for it and he'd be in Yuma out of the way. I helped him do it. After all, he was my son."

"Why did you kill Hale?" Turner shot at him.

Cantwell smiled wisely.

"I didn't say I did," he said, "but—I did. Hale was going to be useful to me, Turner, but he got too ambitious. When I framed the deal to rob the bank, Hale wanted half. I had to dispose of him. If things had worked out right, they'd have sent you back to Yuma for another murder."

He started to laugh. It ended in a choking sound, and he toppled over, dead.

"Well, you're lucky, Mort!" said the sheriff. "Reckon that'll clear you with folks around Dry Wells, Mort. It'll never pay you for them five years in Yuma, though."

There was the sound of pounding hoofs in the yard, the heavy breathing of a hard ridden horse. Millie King flung herself from the saddle, and rushed into the house.

"Mort!" she cried anxiously. "Are you all right?"

He took her in his arms, turned her face away from the body on the floor.

Sheriff Kramer walked out on the porch, facing a bunch of gathering Slash C riders. They didn't understand what he meant when he said:

"I reckon he's bein' paid for them five years now." Then, clearing his throat: "Hustle up a rig boys, your boss is goin' to town—for the last time. There's been—an accident."

When one of the men would have gone into the house, the sheriff pulled the door shut.

"I wouldn't go in there just yet, son," he told the inquisitive cowboy. "There's heaven and hell both the other side of that door. Only them that's in there knows which is which."

Drinks can come high when you're hunting down a bank robber!

DESERT WATER

By JACKSON COLE

HEAT rose from the sands of the desert in shimmering waves. The blazing sun beat down mercilessly on the tired horse and weary rider as they moved slowly across a long stretch of arid wastelands. Death was a phantom horse who rode beside them—a grim fellow traveler who watched and waited.

"Not far now, Rusty," Jerry Harlan told the bay horse he rode. "There should be a water-hole about a mile ahead."

Harlan's voice was a strange, croaking sound, his lips were dry from the thirst that had gradually become more and more unbearable. How long had it been since he and the horse had last tasted water? Twenty-four hours—no longer than that. A day and a night and then the greater part of a second day. It was late afternoon now, but the hours passed slowly.

Dust and sweat caked Harlan's face and made him look older than his twenty-seven years. His flannel shirt and levis clung to his body. The open vest he wore seemed a hot and useless thing, but he did not bother to take it off. His cartridge belt and the sixgun hanging in the holster at his right hip was a heavy, tugging weight across his middle.

He did not speak again as he rode slumped down in the saddle. The beat of Rusty's hoofs as the horse traveled at a walk was muffled by the desert sand. For what seemed hours to Harlan they rode on, and then finally, through the heat haze ahead, he saw a pool gleaming in the hot sunlight.

"There it is, Rusty!" Harlan said. "At least I think it must be the water-hole."

There was doubt in his voice. Fear that that gleaming water might be a desert mirage was strong within him. It was hard to believe in water after the long hours of thirst and heat, and nothing but bleak barren land.

Obviously there were no such doubts in Rusty's brain. The horse scented the water and began to move faster. That pool ahead was no mirage to him. Relief swept over Harlan as the bay increased his pace. That must be real water ahead or Rusty would not bother to move faster.

They reached the pool. It was deserted, but there was a sign sticking up on a post that had been thrust deep into the water, a sign that read:

NO MONEY—NO WATER

Harlan glanced at the sign and paid it no particular heed as he swung out of the saddle. He let Rusty drink, careful that the horse did not take too much of the water at one time. When he was

sure the bay's thirst was satisfied, Harlan led Rusty a little way from the pool and left the horse standing ground-hitched, reins dragging.

THEN Harlan went to the pool and knelt down beside it and drank, picking a place a distance away from where he had watered the horse. He drank slowly, and gradually he felt the dryness leaving him. Finally he took off his neckerchief, thrust it into the water and washed his face with it.

It was growing dark and soon it would be night. He wrung out the neckerchief and then again fastened it about his neck. He didn't hear the rider who approached, for the sand muffled the hoofs of the sorrel.

"That will be fifteen dollars," a hard voice said. "Five for you and ten for the horse."

Harlan got to his feet and turned to face a lean man who sat in the saddle covering him with a long barreled six-gun.

"You heard me, and you saw the sign," said the man on the sorrel. "Hand over the dinero."

"I heard you," Harlan said, relieved to find a great deal of the huskiness had gone out of his voice. "But I just can't believe you or the sign either. That any human being would be low enough to try and collect money from folks before they would let them or their horse drink from a desert water-hole seems impossible."

"Tell that to the boss," said the lean man. "It's not my idea. I'm just acting under orders. When Carl Thorington tells you to do something you do it and like it."

"I'm Jerry Harlan," Harlan said. "What's your name?"

"Tom Braden," said the lean man. "Working for Thorington's Rafter T outfit. This water-hole is part of his property. He keeps a man on guard here day and night to collect. Today is my turn. I got restless and took a little ride, that's why I didn't see you first off."

"Suppose that I haven't got fifteen dollars?" Harlan asked, observing that Braden still had him covered with the gun. "What then?"

"It will be too bad for you," Braden said. "The boss doesn't like hombres who don't pay for their drinks. I'll take that fifteen dollars now."

"All right." Harlan reached into a pocket of his levis and pulled out a thick roll of bills. He peeled off a five and a ten and walked closer to the man on the horse. "Put that gun away, I won't bite you."

Braden wasn't much older than Harlan. There was a shame-faced expression on his lean countenance as he thrust his gun back into the holster. He took the money and stuffed it into his pocket. Harlan put away the roll of bills and then looked anxiously across the desert in the direction from which he had just come. He frowned as he saw the rider who was little more than a speck in the distance. Tom Braden caught the direction of Harlan's gaze and looked in the same direction. He also saw the approaching rider. He glanced at Harlan with a mocking light in his eyes.

"Expecting company?" Braden asked softly.

"Could be," Harlan said. "Hard to be sure of it yet."

"There's only two reasons a man would head across the desert without carrying a canteen filled with water," Braden said. "One because the law is after him and he had to get away fast. Two because he is plumb loco. You don't look or act at all crazy, Harlan."

"At least I'm not crazy enough to admit you could be right on either of those guesses," Harlan said.

He went to his horse and picked up the reins. Then turned to swing into the saddle. "I wouldn't leave right now," Braden said coldly.

Harlan glanced back over his shoulder and saw that the lean man on the sorrel was again covering him with his gun. Harlan frowned and dropped Rusty's reins as he swung around.

"What's it to you whether I go or stay?" he asked. "I paid you the money for drinking from the pool and watering my horse."

"I know," said Braden. "But I don't like this job. Been aiming to quit soon as I figured the time was right. But a man has to have money to live. Now if I was to capture a wanted man and turn

him over to the Law it might pay right good. Especially if there happened to be a reward for the capture of that man."

"I see." Harlan glanced out at the desert. The approaching rider seemed much closer now, though distances were deceptive in the wasteland. He shook his head sadly. "I'm sure disappointed in you, Braden. I didn't think you would be so greedy for cash. Just goes to show you can never tell what a man is by his face."

ABRUPTLY Harlan's right hand flashed up and the gun clutched in his fingers roared. A bullet tore through the crown of Braden's hat. He hadn't even had time to use the Colt that he held.

"Drop that gun!" Harlan snapped. "Or my aim will be much better next time."

Braden hesitated an instant, and then let his gun drop to the ground. He sat in the saddle glaring at Harlan.

"That's better," said Harlan, stepping forward and picking up Braden's gun with his free left hand. "The way you've been aiming this at me made me plumb nervous. Why I figured I was likely to get shot!"

He thrust Braden's gun beneath the waist-band of his levis, and then stepped back, his own gun still in his hand. Braden glanced back hopefully across the desert. The horseman wasn't more than half a mile away now.

"I've got news for you, Braden," Harlan said. "That hombre coming this way is probably John Rayburn, U. S. deputy marshal. He's after a lone bandit who robbed a bank way over on the other side of the desert. Funny thing though. The marshal doesn't know what the man he is after looks like. Just that he headed across the desert and Rayburn started after him."

"That man was you," Braden said.

"There you go jumping at conclusions like a cat after a mouse," said Harlan. Then he grinned. "If my lingo sounds kind of fancy don't you pay it any mind. I happened to read a book once. But to get back to what we were talking about, the marshal might believe I was the jasper who robbed the bank and he might think it was you. Remember he doesn't know what the bandit looks like."

"I can prove that I didn't rob any banks," Braden said.

"Can you?" said Harlan. "Where were you yesterday morning early?"

"Hunting strays out on the range," said Braden. "Spent the whole day doing it and didn't get back to the ranch until last night late."

"Were you alone?" Harlan asked.

"I was," said Braden. "The boss was with me for a while but he left after awhile and I haven't seen him since then. He wasn't at the ranch last night. Maybe he's back now. It was my day to guard the water-hole so I came on out here. Been here ever since."

"Afraid you'll have a hard time proving you didn't rob that bank," Harlan said.

Braden glanced back at the man who had been coming across the desert. The horseman was close enough to be recognized now. The Rafter T cowboy uttered a startled exclamation.

"Why that isn't any marshal," Braden said. "That's my boss, Carl Thorington."

"I knew it wasn't Rayburn," Harlan said. "I didn't know who it was. I've never seen your boss."

It was a big man on a pinto who rode up to them. He halted his mount and glared at the gun in Harlan's hand. There was a big canteen tied to Thorington's saddle.

"What's the idea?" he demanded. "Did this man refuse to pay for drinking at the pool and pull a gun on you, Tom?"

"No," said Braden. "He paid me five dollars from himself and ten dollars for watering his horse."

At first the three men at the water-hole failed to notice the quiet gray haired man on a roan who had ridden around a clump of rocks and was heading toward them. Then Harlan caught sight of the approaching rider but showed no sign of it. He casually moved his gun so that it was covering Thorington. The right hand of the ranch owner had been edging toward his holster.

"Too bad I lost you out in the desert, Thorington," Harlan said. "I was trailing you all the way from Festival. I know you by sight, but I didn't know your name."

"Who is this man, Tom?" Thorington asked Braden. "What is he talking about?"

"His name is Jerry Harlan—leastwise that's what he told me," Braden said. "And I'm beginning to wonder about the rest of it myself."

THE gray haired man rode up and reined the pinto to a halt. There was a lawman's badge on his open vest. He sat silently watching and listening.

"The marshal!" exclaimed Braden, staring at the new arrival. "Reckon you must be John Rayburn."

"That's right," said the gray haired man. "What's going on here?"

"Figure I've caught the bank robber for you, Marshal," Harlan said. "I was in Festival when the bandit came running out of the bank. He was too far down the street for me to try to do any shooting, but I saw that he was a big man and dressed like Thorington is now."

"You're crazy!" said the owner of the Rafter T impatiently. "I haven't been robbing any banks."

"I'm not so sure of that," Harlan said. "I got my horse and trailed the bank robber across the desert. I knew that Marshal Rayburn was in town—and that he would learn which way the robber had headed."

"That's right," said Rayburn. "So I started after the robber hoping that I could hunt him down."

"Just because I happen to look like the man, that's no proof that I was the bank robber," Thorington said. "You couldn't have seen his face, for he was wearing a blue bandanna mask."

"Have you been in Festival lately?" Harlan asked.

"Not for nearly a month," said Thorington. "Found that some of my stock was missing so have been riding around out in the desert looking for the cattle."

"If you haven't been in Festival, then how did you know that the bank robber was wearing a blue bandanna mask?" Harlan demanded.

"Why, why you said so," Thorington stammered in confusion.

"No, I didn't," said Harlan. "No one mentioned that."

"That's what I have been waiting for all of the time," the marshal said, covering the ranch owner with his gun. "Looks lik you are the man I'm after, Thorington."

Harlan reached into his pocket and pulled out a riding glove. "The bank robber dropped this," he said. "And I found it. It has the initials C T on it and a little Rafter T brand. I figure you will find the stolen bank money in Thorington's saddle-roll."

Rayburn dismounted. While Harlan kept the ranch owner and Braden covered the marshal examined the saddle roll fastened to the cantle of Thorington's saddle. The bank money was there.

"Why were you so anxious to get the bank robber, Harlan?" the marshal asked.

"I own a ranch over on the other side of the desert," Harlan said. "Keep all my money in the Festival Bank. I was heading for the bank yesterday to deposit some cash I'd received for a herd of cattle I sold. I saw the bank robber coming out of the bank, and like I said before I trailed after him across the desert—but got lost. Had heard there was a water-hole to the south so I headed for that."

"So that roll of bills you're carrying is your own money," said Braden. "I was sure you had stolen it from the bank, and the marshal was after you."

"It's my money all right," said Harlan. "Made me awful mad about that feller robbing the bank. Way I figured he probably had stolen some of the money I had deposited there I didn't like that at all."

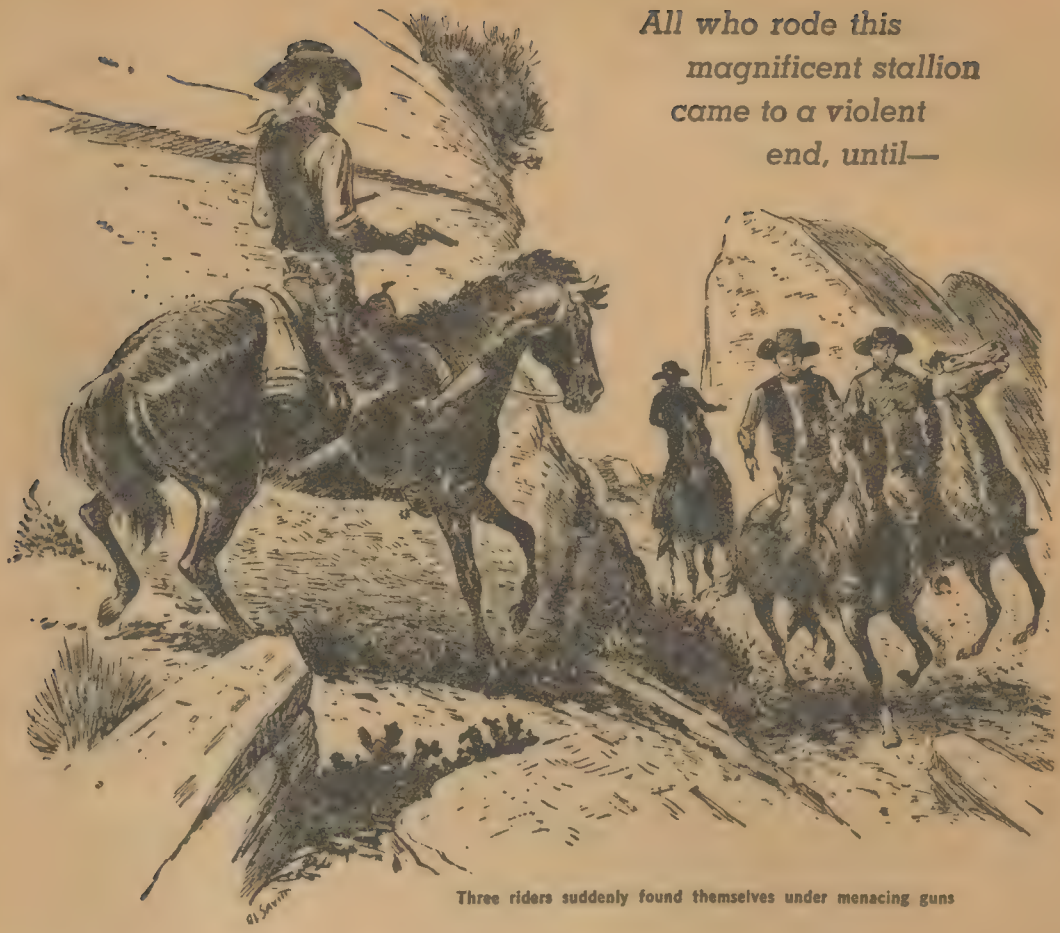
"What made you so sure of Thorington?" the marshal asked.

Harlan nodded to the sign at the water-hole. "Anyone who would collect money by playing a dirty trick like that just had to be a real robber at heart," Harlan said. "And needing money mighty bad."

"There's been some talk of the boss having a big mortgage on the Rafter T," said Braden. He frowned. "You sure cured me of trying to collect some easy money, Harlan."

"Uh-huh," said Harlan drawing Braden's gun out of his waist band and handing it to the cowboy butt first. "Here's your gun, Tom. It still makes me nervous!"

All who rode this magnificent stallion came to a violent end, until—



Three riders suddenly found themselves under menacing guns

TOVAR, The EVIL

By PHILIP KETCHUM

OLD timers, who gather every sunny day in Camarillo's public square, live wholly in the past. Airplanes may roar overhead, automobiles may thunder down the street, the sounds of a radio might blare forth from the open door of a music store, but no distractions of the present day can touch these men who came west when the West was young and who lived through the turbulent era which is gone.

The Camarillo was a raw and rugged country fifty years ago and these oldsters are the men who tamed it. The fund of stories they have to tell is endless. Some are as stark as the high, jagged peaks of the Quemado Mountains which rise east of the valley. Some have a bitter and ironic humor. Some are surprisingly tender.

The most interesting to me and, I think, to them, are the horse stories they

can tell. They love horses, these old men of Camarillo. You can see it in the way their dim eyes light up at the mention of the name of some favorite horse. You can tell it by the vibrant quality which creeps into their voices when they say the name over. And if you are patient you may be rewarded by a story you will never forget, a story such as the story of Tovar, the Evil.

There are still men around Camarillo who swear they saw Tovar when they were young. They describe him as a giant, Arabian stallion. He stood, they insist, well over sixteen hands high, and he weighed better than fifteen hundred pounds. He was black, a glistening, coal black, with no blemish on his body. His high, arched mane fell well below his neck. And he could run. In spite of his weight and his thick body, he could run. When Tovar was in his prime, no other horse in the Camarillo country could match him. All the oldsters agree to that.

"Tovar," they will say. And then they will say, "Tovar, the Evil," and shake their heads as though still deeply puzzled over something that had happened long, long ago, and which still carries its mystery down across the years. The description of Tovar comes next, and after that, the story. As they tell it—

FEW men were in the Adobe saloon that night. It was late, and Fred Hardesty whose ranch was back in the Quemado foothills, faced a long and lonesome ride home. He was ready to go when he heard someone come in and as he turned from the bar he caught his breath. Just inside the saloon stood an Indian, a thin, tall, gaunt, half naked Indian.

For an instant, Hardesty was too startled to move. There had been no Indian trouble in the Camarillo country for several years, yet within his memory there had been an Indian raid on the valley followed by months of terror and uncertainty.

This Indian seemed unarmed, yet the look on his face was harsh, strained. Fred Hardesty reached for his gun. As he drew it, the Indian took a step forward, then crumpled and sprawled to the floor and in his side, Hardesty could see an ugly, bloody gash.

He hurried forward and was joined at once by the others still in the saloon. It was obvious to all of them that the wound was serious. Ed Price hurried away to get a doctor. Hardesty and Bill Rogan, the deputy sheriff, fixed a pack against the wound and turned the Indian on his other side.

"It looks like he's done for," said Rogan. "What kind of Indian is he, anyhow?"

Hardesty shook his head. He didn't know.

"Apache would be my guess," said Sam Ellsworth, "but what an Apache is doing this far from where he ought to be, I don't know."

The Indian's eyes blinked open. His lips moved, and surprisingly enough he spoke in a guttural Englsh, loud enough so that everyone there heard him.

"Jesse Wall," he said. "I have come to see—Jesse Wall."

"Jesse's not here right now," said Bill Rogan.

"But he lives—near here?" asked the Indian.

"On the south fork of the Camarillo river, half a day's ride."

The Indian nodded. His eyes closed for a moment, then opened again.

"Do you know Jesse Wall?" asked Bill Rogan.

"I know him," said the Indian, and his voice was growing weaker. "I have brought him a gift from my people. Will you see—he gets it?"

"Sure I'll see he gets it," said Rogan. "Where is it?"

"Outside," said the Indian. "The horse. Tovar."

"You mean you brought a horse here," said Rogan. "It's outside. Its name is Tovar. It's a gift from your people to Jesse Wall. Is that right?"

"Right," said the Indian.

"And who are you?" asked Rogan.

"Who gave you that wound?"

The Indian's eyes had closed. He made no answer. He didn't wake up again and by the tme Doc Henderson arrived, he was dead. His name was never determined. How he had been wounded was never learned. His tribe could only be guessed.

The Jesse Wall the red man had asked for was a man in his fifties. He had been in the Camarillo country for only a few years. Before coming here he had been an Indian Agent in Arizona. Jesse Wall might have known the Indian, or his tribe, but Jesse was on a hunting trip in the Quemado mountains. Before he could get to Camarillo, the Indian had been buried.

"I'd like to have seen him," said Jesse, scowling. "I might have known him or at least been able to identify his tribe. He was probably an Apache, but of what branch it is hard to guess."

"Did so many Indians love you that you can't guess which ones might have sent you a gift?" asked Rogan.

"I was a good agent," said Jesse Wall.

This wasn't true. Wall had grown rich from the sale of supplies bought by the Government in the name of the Indians. His record was so bad the Army had finally insisted that he be removed. They blamed much of the trouble they were having with the Apaches on Wall's treatment of them.

In view of this it was hard to understand why the Apaches would have sent him a gift, and such a valuable gift, at that. Every man who had seen Tovar had wanted him. A dozen or more were on hand in the hope that Jesse Wall would be willing to sell.

"Tovar is at the livery barn," Rogan mentioned.

"Tovar?" said Jesse Wall.

"The horse. That's his name, according to the Indian. Does the name mean anything to you?"

Jesse Wall bit hs lips. He scowled. After a moment he shook his head. "Not a thing," he answered. "Not a thing."

Fred Hardesty, who heard that question and answer, was watching Jesse Wall quite closely. He was sure that Wall had lied, that the name Tovar had reminded him of something not too pleasant.

"I'll give you a hundred dollars for the horse, Jesse," he offered.

"Maybe I'll take it," Jesse Wall repled. "But let's go see him first."

QUITE a crowd followed Jesse Wall to the livery stable and it was soon clear to everyone that Tovar was not for sale. Jesse Wall had a weakness for horses. He had never seen one to match the black, Arabian stallion. His eyes glistened as he stared at Tovar. He rubbed his hands together and gave a low whistle. "Get my saddle," he said to one of the men who rode for him. "I want to try him. No horse could be as good as this one looks."

Jesse Wall rode Tovar home that night and from that day on was never seen riding any other horse.

In spite of the ugly rumors which had followed Jesse Wall to Camarillo, his conduct since moving here had been almost exemplary. He had been honest in all local dealings. He drove a sharp bargain, it is true, but men had no fault to find with that.

Half a dozen homesteaders had moved in on his range along the lower Camarillo river. Homesteaders had never been popular with cattlemen and Wall had no love for these families, but their claims on the land they occupied were legal and he avoided trouble with them. He got along with the other cattlemen in the valley. He was never a popular man, but in general, he was accepted.

Once a week, sometimes twice, he would ride into town. He might do a little drinking at the Adobe saloon, or discuss the cattle market or the proposed Camarillo dam, or even politics on the hotel porch. He might sit in a poker game at the Long Seven. He was always friendly in his rather cold fashion, friendly and quiet—even reserved.

The change in Jesse Wall was gradual

and at first was hardly identified as a change. He had a fight with a man following a poker game, something which might have happened to anyone. He discharged two men who worked for him, in a sudden rage following a mild argument.

He got drunk one night in Camarillo and engaged in another fight. There were additional incidents, similar to these, and suddenly the men around Camarillo awoke to the fact that Jesse Wall had become arrogant, short tempered, difficult to deal with.

"It's that horse that does it," Arturo Gomez told Hardesty. "When he comes in from a ride on that horse, he's like a wild man. He's filled full of notions of his own importance. He acts like he owns the universe. He struts around like some little king. It takes hours for him to get it out of his system."

Gomez had given up his ranch and had gone to work for Jesse Wall.

"You mean Tovar is responsible for the way Jesse Wall has changed?" said Hardesty.

"That's it, exactly."

"Impossible," said Hardesty.

"You haven't been around him as I have," Gomez insisted. "You haven't seen what I've seen. I tell you, that horse has made him act like a different man. Before he had Tovar he was a rather decent fellow. You've got to admit that."

"Maybe. But how could a horse change a man?"

"Did you ever ride Tovar?"

"No."

"I have," said Gomez slowly. "I rode him one night when Jesse Wall was dead drunk. We started south. Before we had gone a mile I was as drunk as Jesse, not with whisky but with a feeling that I, Arturo Gomez, was the most important man alive, that there was nothing I couldn't do, nothing I couldn't have. This feeling flowed into me through Tovar, like the heat from a fire. I remember I started laughing, laughing as a crazy man might laugh."

"What happened at the end of the ride?" asked Hardesty.

Gomez chuckled. "The end was sudden. Tovar shied at something and I was pitched over his head. When I woke up I was sane again."

"You make it an interesting story, anyhow," said Hardesty.

"A true story," said Gomez. "You will see. Tovar is evil. He has already destroyed Jesse Wall."

Whether or not those words were prophetic, within a week Jesse Wall was dead. He had ordered the homesteaders to move from what he considered his range to the other side of the river. When they had refused, he had stampeded a herd of cattle across their fields. A woman and a boy had died under the pounding feet of the cattle, and a night later, the woman's husband had shot Jesse Wall through the head. A Camarillo jury set him free.

TOVAR had not yet acquired his evil reputation and Martha Wall, who had been Jesse's wife, received several offers for the horse. All were too late. Tovar, she explained, had been given to Arturo Gomez, in payment of a debt owed to Gomez by her husband. She was vague as to the character of the debt. So was Gomez, who refused to discuss what men called his good fortune. Only to Fred Hardesty, who had long been his friend, did Gomez give an explanation.

Gomez was moody and half drunk on the night that he and Hardesty had their talk. He seemed a little frightened, too.

"There was no debt," he admitted.

"Then why did Martha Wall give you the horse?" asked Hardesty.

"She knew it was Tovar who had destroyed her husband. All along, she has seen what was happening."

"So you still believe that nonsense you told me," Hardesty growled.

"It was not nonsense," answered Gomez. "It is understood, between Mrs. Wall and me, that Tovar is to die. He is evil."

Hardesty caught his breath. "But you

can't do a thing like that, Gomez. You can't kill a horse like Tovar because of some silly superstition."

"I can't," said Gomez, "but I must. It is a thing which must be done."

For an hour or more, Hardesty argued with Gomez but the man wouldn't listen to him. Perhaps he was too drunk to listen, or too sick of thinking of what lay ahead.

A week passed and then another. What had happened to Gomez or Tovar, no man knew. No one in the Camarillo country had seen them. It had been expected that Gomez would at least "show off" on Tovar, for there was a vain streak in the man. Yet this hadn't happened, and there were some who guessed that Gomez had hurried away before his ownership of Tovar could be challenged.

Then one evening just at dusk the Dry Wells stage was held-up in the Narrows, some fifteen miles east of Camarillo, held-up by a lone bandit who was masked and who rode a coal-black horse. Tovar! The stage driver was positive in his identification of the horse. He wasn't sure Gomez was the rider. Three days later the Silver Springs stage was held up and this time both the passengers and the driver had a good look at the bandit and his horse.

Arturo Gomez was still under thirty. Not much was known of his background. He had been in the Camarillo country for six or seven years. He had bought a small ranch south of town three years before, but hadn't been able to make a go of it. He hadn't worked at it hard enough, according to Rufe Collins, who had sold him the ranch. He had gambled away the little money that fell into his hands, or he had wasted it on fancy clothing, women, and good times.

A sheriff's posse scoured the country for Gomez, but failed to apprehend him. On one occasion, three riders suddenly found themselves under his guns, and shelled out to him what money they had. Another stage was held up. A ranch was raided and a man who had once had a quarrel with Gomez was found shot to death in the open doorway of his home. There was good evidence that Gomez had shot him. Then one day a man who had met Gomez back in the hills, rode into Camarillo and went directly to the sheriff's office.

"He wants ten thousand dollars, ten thousand in gold," the man reported. "In fact, he ordered me to get it for him. He says that if he is paid this money he will ride away and leave Camarillo in peace. If it is refused, he boasts that he will burn the town to the ground. He talked like a crazy man but I came away convinced of one thing. He means what he said. He really means it."

"Ten thousand," snorted Bill Rogan. "Who's going to pay him ten thousand?"

The sheriff was ill and the responsibility for his work had fallen on Bill Rogan's young shoulders. Rogan was dead tired from his endless and fruitless chase of Gomez. He crossed the street to the Adobe saloon, and there found Fred Hardesty. Rogan and Hardesty had long been friends. They had a drink together.

"We'll get him, finally," said Bill Rogan. "We always do. But I'll never be able to guess what happened to Gomez. He was always a decent sort. Fred, what makes a man go wrong?"

"I can give you a theory," said Fred Hardesty.

"What is it?"

"In this instance, the horse, Tovar."

"Gomez didn't steal the horse."

"No, he was supposed to destroy him. Instead, he probably made the mistake of riding him again."

"What are you talking about?" Rogan scowled.

Hardesty ordered another drink, then told Rogan of his last two talks with Gomez but Rogan shook his head. Rogan was a practical young man. There was no streak of superstition in him. "It's men who are evil," he declared. "Not horses. It's Gomez I'm after, not the horse he rides."

The stages to and from Camarillo now made their runs with armed guards and

three nights later, Gomez, in an attempted holdup, was shot from the saddle and killed.

AFTER this, it was Rufe Collins who claimed the ownership of Tovar. Gomez had purchased from Collins the ranch he had once operated. He had not completed making his payments. Judge Leverage, who was also indebted to Collins, was easily persuaded that Collins' claim was justified.

Collins was a man in the mid-thirties. He was tall, gaunt, moody, and the slave of a violent temper. He ran the livery stable and lived alone in a small house on the edge of town. He had been married but his wife, a rather unattractive woman, had died three years before. Shorty after this Collins had rather desperately courted Bianca Manzanaries, who was now the wife of Felipe Otero.

His failure to win Bianca had made Collins an even more bitter man and for a time he had done some rather heavy drinking. Then, he had seemed to make some adjustment, and had settled down to what was, for him, a normal way of life. He even ignored Bianca when she came to town with her husband. They both worked on the Scheffield ranch.

Fred Hardesty wondered whether or not he should warn Collins about Tovar, but the more he thought of it, the more impossible the story seemed. Nevertheless, he watched Collins with considerable interest, spending more of his time in town than he could really afford.

Collins had started taking a daily ride on Tovar, and if anything, the man's spirits seemed to improve. He was no longer so moody. He laughed more often. He seemed almost human. Then one night Bill Rogan received a summons to the Scheffield ranch and was taken to the cabin which the Oteros had occupied. Outside the cabin lay the body of Felipe Otero, his head crushed from the heavy blow of a club. Inside, was the body of Rufe Collins. He had been stabbed to death by Bianca.

"As I get it," Scheffield reported, "Rufe Collins came out here and hid in the shadows until he had a chance to get Felipe. Then he went inside, the blood still on his hands. He told Bianca he had set her free and that he had come to carry her away. He promised her that they would travel the world. He talked like a madman. I think maybe he was. Bianca did what any woman might have done. So far as she's concerned, it's a clear case of self defense."

Bill Rogan, remembering the story Hardesty had told him, wiped a hand over his face. He went over to the Scheffield barn, where Tovar had been taken. He looked at the black stallion and shuddered. He told Hardesty, later, that there was a wild and mocking gleam in Tovar's eyes, as though the horse knew just what had happened. "I wouldn't admit that to anyone but you," Rogan said to Hardesty. "Folks would think I was batty. But it was there in his eyes. That look. A wild and gloating look. I tell you, I saw it."

Fred Hardesty had been in Silver Springs at the time this had happened. "Where's Tovar now?" he asked.

"Sam Ellsworth has him."

"How come?"

"Felipe's death left Bianca almost destitute. She's going to have a baby. So far as is known, Collins had no relatives. The judge ordered his assets sold and the money turned over to Bianca. Sam Ellsworth put in the highest bid for Tovar."

"So Sam Ellsworth is next," said Hardesty under his breath.

He was right. A week later, Sam Ellsworth, in a mad rage, killed his closest friend and that same night, committed suicide. He left a note, willing the ownership of Tovar to Ed Delaney, a man he had always hated. Delaney never rode Tovar. He sold him to Hal Burroughs, who, within a month, was killed in an attempt to hold up the Camarillo bank.

There is a record of five other men who owned the black stallion. Three of these died violent deaths soon after acquiring him. The fourth man, fleeing

from a sheriff's posse, disappeared into the Quemado mountains and was never seen again, although Tovar was found, three months later, quietly grazing in a mountain meadow. The fifth man was Fred Hardesty.

HARDESTY, at this time, was twenty-nine years old. He was short, solidly built, rather quiet, and had what might be called an even disposition. His ranch, east of Camarillo, had been his father's. He lived there alone. His parents had been dead for several years. He hadn't married, perhaps because he had been too busy, or perhaps because the right girl hadn't come along. Undoubtedly, he rode into town more often than was necessary, but that was understandable. A ranch can be a mighty lonesome place for a young man.

Hardesty had never seen a horse he wanted more than Tovar. The speed, endurance and strength packed into the black's body, appealed to him, and what had happened to everyone who had owned him, held for Hardesty a curious fascination and challenge. His mind and reason wouldn't let him believe what his senses told him was true. When men spoke of "Tovar, the Evil," or "Tovar, the Destroyer," Fred Hardesty shook his head. To him, the big, black, Arabian stallion was all horse. And what a horse! Fast. Strong. Intelligent. Finer than any horse in the Camarillo country.

Bill Balke, a prospector, whom men called Old Bill, found Tovar in the mountain meadow where he had probably been for some time. Old Bill had heard of Tovar and recognized him. He didn't risk riding him back toward Camarillo. Old Bill was taking no chances. When he stopped by at Hardesty's ranch for supper he was riding his burro, and leading the stallion.

"I've claimed him as mine," Old Bill said to Hardesty. "I reckon there's no one will argue with me. Anyhow, I'm going to sell him. Who will be fool enough to buy him, I don't know. But someone will. I might even get fifty dollars for him."

Fred Hardesty took a deep breath. His eyes measured the lines of the stallion's body. His neck was arched high. It seemed to Hardesty that the horse was looking straight at him, daring him to do what was in his mind.

"I'll give you fifty dollars for him," said Hardesty.

Old Bill scowled. "You know what you're doing, son? You know what you're buying?"

"A horse," said Hardesty. "The finest horse this country ever saw, but just a horse."

So the reappearance of Tovar in the Camarillo valley revived all the stories about him and led to the inevitable predictions as to what would happen to Fred Hardesty. Ollie Stern, who ran the general store, gave Hardesty six weeks. "Hardesty's a stronger man than Jesse Wall, or Gomez, or Collins, or the others who have owned Tovar," Stern declared. "He has more character. He can hold out longer, but in the end, Tovar will get him. There's something about that horse that frightens me."

Most folks agreed with Stern. A few, who were rather fond of Fred Hardesty, went out to see him with advice he wouldn't take. Among these was Bill Rogan.

"You can't do it, Fred," Rogan insisted. "You can't take the risk. I don't want to have to start after you as I have most of the others."

"You'll not have to," said Hardesty. "Tovar is only a horse."

"He's more than a horse, and you know it. Have you ridden him yet?"

Hardesty shook his head.

"Let me take him away," said Rogan. "Sell him to me. Let me get rid of him."

Again, Hardesty shook his head. "Bill, give me a month with Tovar," he said. "If I've changed in a month, if I've stepped out of line, knock me over the head and take him. But give me that month."

Rogan didn't want to. He argued with Hardesty until he was worn out, but in

the end he rode back to Camarillo without Tovar.

The day after Rogan's visit, Hardesty saddled up the horse he usually rode and headed south for a visit to Martha Wall, who had been Jesse Wall's wife. She still lived on the ranch which her husband had bought when he first came to Camarillo. It was up for sale but thus far there had been no purchaser.

"I have bought Tovar," Hardesty told her bluntly.

Martha Wall stiffened. Her hands clenched. "Destroy him," she said sharply. "Never ride him. Tovar is evil."

"He is just a horse," said Hardesty.

"He is more than a horse. He is death."

"Tell me about him," said Hardesty.

Martha Wall hesitated quite a while before she spoke. "There is nothing I can tell you. Nothing you would understand, nothing I understand myself, excepting that Tovar is evil and to ride him is to die."

"What does the name Tovar mean?" asked Hardesty.

"There is an Indian burial ground near Fort Defiance. The name the Apaches have for it, sounds, in their language, very much like Tovar. The Apache name is longer, but Jesse thought—" The woman's voice broke off. She turned away. She would talk no more about the black stallion.

WITHOUT another word, Hardesty rode back to his ranch. He stopped at the corral and looked at Tovar, who seemed to have come to attention the minute Hardesty had appeared. He had owned Tovar now for a week. He hadn't yet saddled him. He was still arguing with himself, still trying to convince himself that there could be no evil in a horse, and that the legend which had grown up around the black was only a superstition.

"We will start day after tomorrow, Tovar," he said slowly. "We will see who is the stronger, you or me."

Tovar tossed his head and neighed, as though accepting the challenge.

Back in the lower hills of the Quemado mountains on what men call the Mustang Flats, was an old line cabin. Fred Hardesty rode in there the next day, packing supplies and leading Tovar. He had little sleep during the night and was up before dawn. After his breakfast and just as the sun came over the hills, he saddled the black stallion, then stood for a moment at his head.

"We're going to ride, Tovar," he said slowly. "We're going to ride back and forth across this country until your legs won't hold you up or until I can't sit the saddle any longer. And if there's any ugly magic in your system, show it to me. Show it to me right away."

Tovar tossed his head and stood waiting. Hardesty swung into the saddle. "All right, Tovar," he called. "Run. Let's see what you can do."

Tovar streaked out across the rolling flats in what seemed to Hardesty like an almost effortless gallop, but he was moving. Really moving. His pounding feet chewed up the distance. Hardesty realized, suddenly, that he had never traveled so fast, or more smoothly. This was like riding the wind. Like flying. It was like nothing he had ever known. Excitement was pounding at his temples. "Faster, Tovar!" he screamed. "Faster!" And it seemed that Tovar answered his shout with a new burst of speed.

Several miles across the flats from the line cabin, Hardesty pulled up. He was breathing fast, as though it was he who had been making the race. Excitement still gripped him. He sat straight in the saddle, proudly his shoulders squared, his head thrown back. His body was trembling. He knew, suddenly, that what he had just felt and was still feeling, others who had ridden Tovar had known. Gomez had experienced this, a sense of power flowing into his body like a heady wine, blinding him to every other consideration.

"Again, Tovar," said Fred Hardesty. "Again."

Once more the black stallion took out across the flats with Hardesty shouting

at him and urging him on and on, feeling the sense of power it gave him to be mounted on such a magnificent animal, a new sense of his own importance and strength. This was it. This was what the others had known and what had destroyed them. This was what was now eating at Hardesty.

They stopped again, then rode on. They stopped once more, then rode. The sun climbed high into the sky. It started down into the west. Back and forth across the flats Hardesty rode the black, shouting at him, driving him, letting him rest for only a time then calling on him for a greater effort. This was why he had come here. He had come to ride out whatever spell it was which Tovar had cast over the men who had known him.

By dusk, Hardesty was so stiff he could hardly move. He was too tired to rub Tovar down, too tired to eat.

"There will be more of the same tomorrow," he said to the stallion. "We'll see who wins, you or me. There will be more the next day and the next. This is only the beginning."

RETURNING to his ranch ten days later, Hardesty was riding Tovar. A week after this he rode Tovar to town. As he tied the black stallion to the hitching rail in front of the Adobe saloon, he was aware of the curious way men were watching him. He combed his fingers through Tovar's mane and there was real affection in the gesture. "I wonder what they're expecting, Tovar?" he grinned. "Will we disappoint them."

Hardesty's face, they say, was thin and drawn and he had lost close to twenty pounds. He seemed tired as he stood at the bar and had his drink. And he was quiet. If anything, more quiet than usual. He stayed in town for several hours. He played poker for a time, his ordinary, conservative game. He discussed the cattle market with Ben Roth and Dave Olsen. He didn't once say anything about Tovar.

A week later he rode to town again and after that he rode in sometimes twice a week. He regained the weight he had lost. He fell in love with a girl and started courting her. A month passed and another and another and nothing happened. Hardesty showed no indication at all of going bad. One night the name of Tovar came up in a group of which he was a part.

"Tovar is just a horse," said Fred Hardesty. "He's a mighty fine horse but still, just a horse."

After a year, people stopped referring to Tovar as evil, and stopped watching Hardesty as though expecting something terrible to happen. But it was still remarked as strange that Hardesty never allowed anyone else to ride the stallion, or would never enter Tovar in a race.

One night in the Adobe saloon a dozen years later, Bill Rogan was telling a man new to the valley the story of Tovar.

"But how did Hardesty escape?" asked the man.

"He was stronger than Tovar," said Rogan sowly. "He took Tovar back into the hills. I followed them. I saw the struggle between them. From dawn until dusk, for ten days, they fought it out, racing back and forth across the flats. At the end of that time, Hardesty was able to ride Tovar at a walk. The strength and power of the stallion no longer went to his head. Hardesty will tell you that Tovar is just a horse, and perhaps to Hardesty, he is. But I can tell you this. The evil that was in Tovar is still there. I know. One night not long ago, and unknown to Hardesty, I rode him." A shudder ran over Rogan's body.

"I'd like to ride him," said the man.

"What kind of life have you lived?" asked Rogan. "Before you mount Tovar, ask yourself that. I'd never ride him again. I wouldn't take the chance and yet there is no horse in the world I'd rather ride. Wait until you see him. He's black, a glistening black. He stands more than sixteen hands high and weighs over fifteen hundred pounds. He has a high, arched neck, a long mane, and a look in his eyes which will startle you. Tovar! Tovar, the Evil!"

RAMBLER'S

CHAPTER I
Drygulched

OLD BUCK KERNAN came out to breakfast scowling and sat down at the long table without even a nod for his daughter. Since she was all he had, and, by the same token, he was all she had—that foster brother of Sanna's was hardly worth mentioning here—old Buck's ignoring her in this fashion was to her like a blow from a mailed fist. She remembered suddenly that her giant, spade-bearded father had been morose for days.

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RANGE

The very earth seemed to rock at the explosion of so much gunfire

an exciting novelet by HAPSBURG LIEBE

Justice-seeking Del Nash is the apex of a grim three-cornered feud which sweeps across the Roaring K grasslands with powdersmoke fury!

"There's no reason for this, Dad," she told him, her fine, deep blue eyes full of concern. "I wonder if you're not a little like that big man in history who was broken-hearted because there were no more worlds to conquer? It's silly. Half of Kernan City is yours; your Roaring K is the biggest cow spread within a hundred miles; this great, new ranchhouse is a show place. Buck up, Buck Kernan!"

He said nothing. Sanna jumped at a conclusion. After the old Mexican woman cook had poured their coffee and gone back to the kitchen, the girl asked softly: "It's not Ansie, Dad, is it?"

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Ansie was the foster brother. He spent most of his time in town.

Now Kernan spoke. "No, but it could be, well enough. I'm afraid Wingo Flint is havin' too much influence. But we'll forget that. Whatever happens, you're fixed, San, and that's all that really matters. It was for you, and only you, that I've worked so hard. Say, look here; what are you wearin' that kind of clothes for, San?"

She had on a worn but still serviceable brown corduroy divided skirt, faded tan shirtwaist, scuffed russet boots and old blue neckerchief. He wanted her to go dressed in silks and satins all the time! Very proud of her, he was.

"I ride every morning," she answered simply.

Kernan growled something unintelligible into his beard. He ate almost nothing, rose and hurried out of the dining room. A minute later he had put on his great, pearl-gray John B. hat and was stalking toward a shining new buckboard outside. The horses that drew him swiftly toward town were the finest matched dapplebays in the sovereign state of Arizona.

TALL, old Roaring K cowboy, Long Jim Dawson, had made the team ready. He had only fairly turned for the bunkhouse when Sanna caught his lean, sinewy arm and halted him. Her gaze drilled into him. The fresh morning breeze whipped a wayward wisp of brown-gold hair across her eyes, but even then she did not blink. Her face, handsome rather than pretty, was a little pale.

"What's come over my *padre*, Long Jim? I won't blab it around. Out with it!"

Dawson had been a Kernan man during all the girl's life. He knew things, always. His leathery old face became very sober.

"Well, Miss San, I was in town with Buck last night, and he met a young stranger which is knowed as the Blood Mountain Kid. Seems that some of them everlastin' drifters had reckernized this Kid. When your paw heard the name, he turned as white as a sheet, and— Uh, I reckon that's all I know, Miss San, ma'am."

He idolized this wholesome girl. For the moment it had made him incautious. She caught his other arm and gave him a vigorous shaking. "That is not all you know, Long Jim! I want the rest of it!" she cried.

But he would tell her nothing else. Both pleading and scolding were of no avail. Then as though to herself the girl said: "Not something out of Dad's past? When Mother went, I was only four, and he sent me to Uncle George and Aunt Myra in Texas. I was there until I was sixteen—but no! I won't believe he was ever anything but upright. He's been sort of grasping, maybe. Yes, he has. But it was for me. Jim, please bring the palomino, will you?"

She turned into the house for her floppy, comfortable old white Stetson hat. When she came back, Dawson had the trim pony ready and waiting. She swung nimbly into the saddle and headed the willing little animal into a broad grassy plain that was dotted thickly with fat white-face cattle. The old cowboy grinned after her in admiration. Sanna Kernan was quite the finest horsewoman he had ever seen.

Two hours later Sanna rode her palomino into the cool shade of creek cottonwoods and drew rein. She sat her saddle thinking, staring off at nothing. Then from the stream behind her there came the sounds of iron-shod hoofs splashing among stones, and she turned her head to see a pair of strange riders approaching.

"Mawnin', ma'am," drawled one of them. He was a scrawny and scraggly-bearded, coppery-skinned old-timer on a rawboned buckskin. Under each hip he wore an old Colt six-gun. He flung a sharp glance over a thin shoulder before he went on: "Plumb hot today, ain't it, ma'am? We didn't aim to bust in on you thisaway. Was nearly on you before we

seen you."

The other rider did not speak, merely touching the front of his big gray hat politely. He was young, not a big man, but his build was solid, closely-knit. He had a heavy thatch of cinnamon-brown hair, eyes of the clearest gray, and was good-looking in spite of a certain tragic grimness about his mouth. He had only one gun, but it was almost new, with an ivory handle.

Sanna nodded to them, and the old-timer proceeded:

"I'm Little Panamint Truby, ma'am, and my amigo here, he's Delaney Nash."

Again he flung a sharp glance over his shoulder. He bent an ear, heard nothing, seemed satisfied.

"And who mought you be, miss?" he inquired.

She smiled and gave her name. At the sound of it Del Nash went tense in every muscle. His face lost a little of its ruddy color. He edged his lean, long-legged roan a few yards away from the other two as though he disliked their company. The wizened Truby said then: "Heap big outfit you folks got here, ma'am. Me and Del was jest lookin' it over. Thought mebbe we might try to git us rider jobs here."

"Don't lie, Panamint," Nash jerked out in tones that were hard with displeasure. "You talk too much, *viejo,* sometimes."

THE girl passed that by, and smiled again. She'd always had a warm spot in her heart for desert rats, and Little Panamint Truby had all the earmarks of one.

"Yes, she said, "it's a big outfit. This plain runs from those sawtooth hills you see far over to the east to other such hills just as far to the west, and our Roaring K takes up half of it. So many have drifted in here and drifted out again—my Dad calls it a port for missing men—that the whole section has come to be known as Rambler's Range."

Young Nash's voice this time was not hard, though it held an underlying queer note: "There's a big boss hombre somewhere around that has caused most of the driftin' out. I mean, when he doesn't happen to like anybody, he sees that they leave. But why, ma'am, do they call your place the Roaring K? Is it supposed to be a wild-buckaroo sort of place?"

Sanna nodded reluctantly. A thought flashed into her brain with explosive force. There wasn't anything strange about it. For two hours she had been mentally reviewing her talk with Long Jim Dawson. Breathlessly she asked:

"You're not by any chance the so-called, 'Blood Mountain Kid,' are you, Del Nash?"

"I am," he said quickly, bluntly. "Not that I'm crazy about the fool name. Wish I was rid of it. If some range bum hadn't recognized me in town last night and yelled at me—" He broke off short, and snapped at Truby, who had half turned in his worn saddle and was staring fixedly northward through the cottonwoods: "See anything, Panamint?"

"No," Truby said, "though my same hunch is workin', and it tells me we'd better keep movin'. I'd sure bet a horse ag'inst a bent dime, *amigo,* that we're bein' follered. Bullets ain't got no eyes, and ef one was to hit this here purty senorita I reckon it wouldn't tickle neither one of us much. So let's ride on down toward town, Del, huh?"

"Bueno." Nash spoke rapidly now: "Ma'am, listen. Over in Nueva Mex there's a long, red-rock hill they call Blood Mountain, and I'm from that section, and it's not because I'm anything like a killer that they saddled the name on me. Not that I've been a saint! But what I've done, that I'm not proud of, I had to do or die, and I claim the right to live. Don't know why I wanted you to know. All right, Little Panamint, I'm comin'!"

The two men rode off southward along the edge of the creek cottonwoods.

Sanna's thoughts flew swiftly as she watched them go. Old Buck Kernan was a fighter, had been born a fighter. He was all iron and oak. Who could this

Del Nash be, that her sire had gone pale at sight of him? She was conscious of nearness to strange, poignant grief. For in spite of herself she felt queerly drawn toward that clear-eyed and grim-mouthed enemy of old Buck's!

"It's impossible," she heard herself saying as she turned the palomino across the grasslands and homeward. "Nobody ever loved a dad as much as I love mine, and no man ever loved his children as much as Buck Kernan loves me. Right or wrong, I'll stick to him as long as I live."

SANNA'S pony had covered less than a quarter mile of rangeland when Anson Hilliard came in a gallop from the cottonwood line above, and overtook her. This foster brother, two years older than the girl, was big and soft-looking, handsome in spite of his weak mouth.

He dressed flashily, a combination that rawhide-tough Rambler's Range in general found a little hard on the eye.

"Ansie, where have you been?" pointedly asked Sanna, as he reined his sweating big sorrel to a walk beside her palomino. He scowled, did not speak. She noted the silvermounted .45 six-gun in its stamped buff leather holster under his right hip, made a good guess and went on: "Out with your crony, Wingo Flint, smoothest of gamblers and gun artists, trailing Del Nash to kill him! For the love of heaven, Ansie, why?"

Hilliard's scowl deepened. Then he blurted: "Nash called me 'Heliotrope' in town last night, San, and I'll never hear the last of it! Maybe Wingo is a smooth gambler and gunslick, but he's in Dad's pay."

Sanna Kernan for long had tried to close her eyes to that. Her face became tragic. Hilliard pursued: "Too hot for anything now. Me, I headed out for home. Wingo rode on down the creek on the other side, toward town."

What if he overtook Del Nash and Little Panamint Truby? The girl's bewilderment became a suffocating fog. Buck Kernan hiring somebody to kill somebody else! But she couldn't believe it. Surely, if they had been after Del Nash, Flint and Hilliard had taken it upon themselves to rid old Buck of his young would-be Nemesis. Like Long Jim Dawson, Wingo Flint had been close to Buck Kernan for many years, and he, also, knew things.

The sudden dull thunder of a six-gun interrupted the girl's tangled thinking. Instantly following, there were four more shots, fanned out so close together that they made an almost continous blast of sound. Sanna and her foster brother had jerked halfway around in their saddles. They saw a dim haze of powder smoke rising among the creek cottonwoods below.

Flint must have overtaken his quarry —Flint, the ambidextrous six-gun wonder.

"Come with me, Ansie!" Sanna cried, and sent her pony in a mad gallop toward the rising haze.

Hilliard spurred quickly after the girl.

Within a very few minutes they were dismounting beside the still, supine form of a young man whose gray eyes were not quite closed against the light and heat of the brassy sky, whose thatch of cinnamon-colored hair was fast turning scarlet. There were hurried footsteps in the nearby underbrush, and the pinched, bleak, cracked voice of Panamint Truby suddenly beat into their ears.

"Murdered by Buck Kernan's hired killer, Wingo Flint! I took the chance, though it made me miss all four shots, but Blood Mountain wouldn't. Ma'am, we spied Flint in time, but we hadn't seen you leave the trees up there, and the Kid wouldn't shoot in that direction for fear of hittin' you."

Sanna Kernan choked, and bent, sobbing, closer to Del Nash.

NEXT ISSUE

CUPID PACKS A GUN

A Pioneer Folk Story by

HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

AND MANY OTHER STORIES

CHAPTER II

Flint's Proposal

AT ABOUT this same time Buck Kernan sat in his office in the rear of the Kernan City bank asking himself gloomily whether anything was worth while. His endless fighting and striving and scheming, either driving hard bargains or taking what he wanted by sheer force—how much satisfaction would anybody ever get out of it? Sanna was worth all that the wealth he had accumulated for her had cost him, but if she knew how he had come by most of it, she wouldn't have it!

"I wonder why I didn't think of this in time," he growled into his beard. He rose from his desk and walked out to the hot and dusty street as though to get away from his thoughts.

Everywhere his gaze fell he saw something that mocked him. The bank, the hotel, the two big general merchandise stores, the livery stable. They were all his. The sheriff over there in the doorway of the squat jail building was his, and the deputies. Half a dozen off-duty cowboys rode past and spoke deferentially. His cowboys. A man of forty, tall and dark, with eyes as keen as an eagle's and with a six-gun humping his long black coat on either side, galloped a winded horse up to a saloon hitchrack and dismounted. It was the gambler and gunslick, Wingo Flint. His Wingo Flint.

The newcomer approached him and said in a low voice: "You won't have to worry about Del Nash any more, Buck. I just killed him."

Old Kernan could feel the blood draining out of his bearded cheeks. His great hands clenched slowly into white-knuckled fists, then became suddenly limp. His voice trembled, which was odd, considering that he had always been a man of oak and iron: "You—killed him?"

"Yeah," nodded Flint, his keen eyes going crafty. "Had to, to save myself. So you can forget Blood Mountain now, Buck. Let's go get a drink."

"I don't want a drink," the big boss said queerly. "Think I'll go home for dinner, and I'd better start now."

He walked off toward the livery stable for his buckboard.

Wingo hurried after him. "One minute, Buck."

Kernan halted and half turned. Plainly, Wingo was steeling himself for an unusual task. He said: "You couldn't get along very easy without me, Buck, and now I want you to do somethin' for me. It's this. I'm askin' you to set me right with Sanna. She's old enough to marry now. I reckon I've got your permission to ask her?"

Again Kernan's bearded face blanched white. Not that he was greatly surprised, for Flint had gall. But old Buck had no wish, certainly, to incur the enmity of this man. Since the big boss did not speak, the ambitious gambler-gunslick hurried on: "You're not loco enough to think I'd do all I've done just for the little money you've paid me, are you?"

"I thought I'd always paid you right well, Wingo," Kernan said. He was suddenly conscious of a wild desire to mix gun smoke with the dangerous Flint. But that would be suicide. He heard his shaken voice saying: "You can ask her if you like, though it'd be a waste of breath. Because she wouldn't marry you. If anybody on earth ever had a head of her own, Wingo, it's San. You ought to know that."

Flint's eyes became glittering black ice. A long moment, and the gun wonder turned toward the nearest saloon. But in there he did not ask for a drink. Instead, he went on to a back room, entered and kicked the door shut behind him. He ignored the greetings of half a dozen younger men of his precise stripe who

sat playing stud at a table, sat down at a littered desk, bared gleaming white teeth and laughed venomously.

Buck Kernan drove home in a daze. Half a mile across the plain to his left a Roaring K cowboy, Peach Hale, was galloping a range horse madly toward town. Old Buck did not see him.

LONG JIM DAWSON was on hand to take the reins when Kernan reached the big new ranchhouse that he had been so proud of. Dawson's leathery face was queerly and grimly set. "What's wrong?" the cattleman barked; and Long Jim answered, with the privilege of an old retainer: "Sure, there's plenty wrong. Go inside and see for yourself."

A moment later Kernan walked into the spacious and splendidly furnished living-room, and halted near the middle of the floor. His gaze was riveted upon a group of persons hovering over a motionless figure on a brocaded-velvet couch—Sanna, Ansie Hilliard, the old cook, Panamint Truby, and a pair of stalwart Roaring K riders. The Mexican woman held a basin of cold water. Sanna was just taking a folded wet towel from Delaney Nash's head wound, and replacing it with a fresh one.

"I heard he was dead," the giant newcomer rumbled.

All had seen him. Nobody said anything. Then Nash sat up. He was still pale under his rich tan. He spoke, and his voice was weak, but for all of that it held a steely ring. "I'm not dead, but no thanks to you, or Flint, or Heliotrope here," he said, his clear gray eyes drilling deeply into Kernan's.

The girl sought bravely to smooth matters over. "Dad, I had him brought here. He was unconscious. I sent Peach Hale to town for Doctor Walters. Did you—"

"No, I didn't," her sire cut in sharply. The ever garrulous Panamint took it upon himself to do some talking:

"I reckon the Flint sidewinder thinks he throwed a fang into the Kid, but he didn't. The Kid ducked off his hoss barely in time, and Flint's slug grazed the roan's neck and skeered it, made the hoss jump and ketch Del's foot in a stirrup, and it slung Del's head ag'in a big rock there in the cottonwoods. At fust I thought he was shot."

"That so?" Kernan growled. "You Blood Mountain Kid, you're able to ride. So get up from there and ride; and if you've got the brains of a chuckwalla lizard, you won't stop this side of a thousand miles!"

"If I stay in this section," icily replied Nash, "you'll have me hung, maybe, eh?"

Sanna was watching her father closely. She saw him stiffen as though he'd been knifed in the back. Del Nash rose, staggered a little, steadied himself. Old Truby gave him his gun-belt and hat, and he buckled on the ivory-handled Colt.

"Hung, yeah," he said, clipping his words, "like you had my Daddy hung, over in the Blood Mountain country. And after that—"

It was the sight of torturing pain in Sanna Kernan's face that caused him to break off short. At last he told her, low-voiced and with a good deal of feeling:

"I'm sorry, ma'am. And I sure thank you."

Del Nash left the house with the ever faithful Panamint on his heels. The two cowboys watched Buck Kernan for a possible order in connection with the strangers.

But they received no such order, which might, or might not, have been because Sanna just then was trying to lead her sire toward the small room that he used for a ranch office.

He went with her. They heard a clattering of hoofs outside, four sets of them. The strangers were riding away, the cowboys were going back to the range. The girl put both her hands on old Buck's shoulders.

"I've got to know, *padre*. I won't rest until I do know. So you must tell me, *padre*."

TO give this man his due, he was not a liar. He did not lie to his daughter now.

"After your mother died and I'd sent you to George and Myra in Texas, San, I went over to Nueva Mex to go into cattle. Most of the range was wild, owned by nobody. The only law outside of towns was a law which said that range belonged to them who could take it and hold it. The trouble here was, Del Nash's daddy and me claimed the same big valley at the same time. I had my men, he had his, and a bloody war was ready to pop. At the head of this valley there was a town, and a hard, conscientious sheriff who tried to keep peace between us.

"Well," Kernan pursued, "one day old Friel Nash met me on the main street of the town, and he said to me: 'Buck Kernan. I've got a way to settle the whole business without killin' off a dozen or so men who likely are better than we are.' He meant, of course, our cowboys. 'We'll just shoot it out, you and me,' he said, 'and the one that lives gets the valley. Are you game?' he said.

"Del was with him, I remember. A spindly-legged button about ten years old. What Friel Nash said to me made me so blind mad, San, that I even forgot you. I told him I'd shoot it out with him anywhere and any time he mentioned. But that sheriff got wind of it, and he was on us before Nash could name a time and place.

"'You two hombres may be chief tomcats on the range,' he told us, 'but I'm the chief tomcat in this town. If you try that shootin' stuff here, you've got my word for it that I'll hang the one who does the killin'.'

"He meant that, San. Friel Nash winked at me and walked off. But late that night we met again, under a full bright moon, and we went for gun iron on sight. He was fast, like young Del is now. But I dropped under his lead, though this move made my bullet miss him. His bullet smacked into a crowded saloon back of me, and killed one of that same hard sheriff's deputies! Well, old Nash and me, the only ones who knew, got away from there in a hurry. Then I thought of you, San, motherless. I told—the sheriff—and he hung Friel Nash."

The last part of it came with difficulty. With equal difficulty the girl managed to say:

"And what of Del, the button?"

Old Buck cleared his throat. "Del rode up to me on the range a few days later, and said he wanted me to know that he was goin' to settle with me some time, but he didn't say how, and I'm still wonderin'—how."

Sanna took her hands from his shoulders. She went to a window, stared out at nothing for a long minute, then turned slowly back to her sire. Her deep-blue eyes were almost black, her face pale and drawn.

"So you told, and Friel Nash was hanged, because you were thinking of me." Her voice was pinched down almost to a whisper. "Even though Friel Nash was guilty—so were you, Dad. I'll always wish you hadn't told."

With that she left him. She left the house, and wandered into the cool shade of the liveoaks that had led Buck Kernan to build his big ranchhouse there. She sat down on the dead leaves, took up one after another and slowly tore each to bits without seeing it. She was thinking of Del Nash, better known as the Blood Mountain Kid, riding disconsolately up and down the world under a black cloud of stigma. For his father had been hanged.

Dully to Sanna Kernan's ears came the sounds of hoofs in the nearby road. She had a glimpse of a roan horse through the low-hanging liveoak branches, and got quickly to her feet. But it was not Delaney Nash. It was Wingo Flint.

He saw the girl, and dismounted. He came straight to her. Freshly shaven, in his newest black broadcloth, his was an imposing figure. But there was sinister menace in his smile.

HIS smile vanished when he'd had one fair look at her face.

"Buck tell you how he got possession of that valley over in the Blood Mountain country?"

"Yes," Sanna answered. "Were you—there with him?"

"Yes." Flint narrowed one hard, dark eye. "And with him here, too. What makes you despise me, Sanna?"

"I don't. I don't despise anybody. But I've been a little mad at you on account of Ansie, Wingo. He's been so wild since he's been running with you. Hardly ever comes home any more."

"Ansie Hilliard was born wild," Flint said. "His dad was a king of the owlhoots, and did Buck Kernan lots of favors; helped Buck hold that Nueva Mex range, for one thing. When he died Buck promised to look after his boy. Now, Sanna, listen. I've loved you from the time you was sixteen. I didn't tell you because you wasn't old enough to know your own mind. But you're old enough now. Will you marry me?"

About him there was an odd, cocksure air that startled her. He did not appear at all anxious. It was as though he were absolutely certain that she would accept him.

"No, no!" she said. "I won't throw myself away on you!"

He smiled queerly. "Buck told you what he did for you in the Blood Mountain country. You've seen a little of what he's done for you. To set you up as the richest woman in this end of the state, you know, when he's gone. Havin' done so much for you, you ought to be willin' to do somethin' for him, oughtn't you? I—wait until I'm through, querida! Now get this. I hold Buck Kernan's life, and every cent he's got in cash or cattle or property, in my hands. If it was to save all of this for him, would you 'throw yourself away on me'?"

The girl sank again to the dead leaves, and bent her brown-gold head. Wingo Flint had to go to his knees before her in order to catch her low-whispered answer. "If it were like that—yes. But it isn't like that."

Flint laughed. "All right, I'll show you."

CHAPTER III

Necktie Party?

DEL NASH and little Panamint Truby left Roaring K ranch headquarters and rode south-westward. They passed many cattle, all of them prime whitefaces. Occasionally they passed a hard-bitten range rider who eyed them closely, but made no attempt to molest them.

"If she hadn't told us why this outfit is known as the Roaring K," muttered Nash, "we'd know it by just lookin' at the punchers. Her name's Sanna, ain't it?"

"Yeah, that's what the others called her," old Truby said dryly. "We'd ought to have rid south toward town and met that there bone sawyer and got him to sew up the gash in your noggin."

"No, Panamint. I'm all right. We're headed for the U Stirrup spread where we slept night before last. Promised Underwood we'd be back today. He was to talk with the other ranchers in the south half of the Range, you'll remember."

Truby nodded, then scratched his chin thoughtfully. "So you won't mind fightin' a gal, Kid?"

"Worse than anything!" Del exclaimed. "Wish you'd had brains enough to not let her take me to the house to doctor up. That puts me in her debt, which makes it twice as bad."

They rode on and on, still with whiteface cattle thick to right and to left, still with an occasional slit-eyed cowboy bobbing up to watch them closely. They had crossed the creek, and were almost through the line of cottonwood, when

a stocky man on a lean dun horse rode from behind a tall brush clump and blocked their way.

"What're you jiggers doin' here?" he barked at them.

"None of your business," Del Nash said, and drew his Colt because Stocky was streaking a hand toward his. Wham! Stocky dropped his gun.

"Heck," he gasped, "you busted my shoulder!"

"Which same you ast fer," coolly observed Panamint. "Reckon you think your Wingo Flint is fast, too. Just ride on back to the big house, and mebbe you'll be in time to ketch Doc Walters."

"And be sure to tell Kernan how it was," Nash added. "Come on, Panamint."

Again they rode southwestward. After a few more miles the fat whitefaces changed from the big K brand to thin U Stirrup cattle. The land became poor and the grass short. A ramshackle old frame-and-adobe ranchhouse finally appeared in a forlorn-looking straggle of trees ahead.

Hape Underwood was tall and lank and grizzled, a man whose face held a beaten look. He sat on the front gallery with half a dozen men of his exact kind —little ranchers, all, and with that same beaten look in their bronzed faces. At sight of the two newcomers riding in, the seven rose and walked out to meet them.

"Well, Nash," Underwood began, "you seen for yourself that what I told you was correct, didn't you?"

Del's head ached under its wound. He passed a hand across his gray eyes as though to clear both them and his thoughts.

"No, Hape. You can't drive K cattle in any numbers through any of the rough hill passes to the north. They'd have to go out to the south, even though you capture and hold Kernan and Flint before you start your big raid. And you sure can't do it on one night, no matter how many cowboys you've got that'll stick to you."

HERE was a thing that had been boiling for years. Among these little ranchers there was not one who had leader stuff in him, or they would have tried to squirm out from under the Kernan iron heel and take back that which Kernan had wrested from them in one way or in another. Del Nash was scarcely twenty-four, but his grievance was heavier even than theirs, and in him they sought to see the answer to their problem.

"It's just too much like rustlin' to suit you!" flared Hape. "Dang it, didn't Buck Kernan drive us all down here where there's no grass? Even if we took the range back, and had no cattle, what'd it be worth to us? Now, them K cows can be sold and slickears bought with the money—"

"I know," patiently interrupted Nash. "Hombres, we've got to do some big thinkin' before we try anything, or we won't do anything but die. Hape, here's two dollars for your woman. Ask her for a little grub for Panamint and me. You feed and water our horses."

An hour or more passed. Poorly fed and poorly clothed cowboys drifted in, U Stirrup, Star and Rafter, Bar C, Flat A, Double E, and others. Everywhere old six-guns or carbines bristled.

"It'd be simple, if we only had money enough," Underwood said. "We'd buy off half of Kernan's range crew, and half of Flint's town gang. They'd sell out, all right. It's all the same owlhoot breed—say, look what's comin' lickety split! A big sorrel and a palomino."

"The Kernan gal and the Heliotrope jigger!" gasped Little Panamint Truby, and turned to face Del Nash.

"Stay here," ordered Nash, and walked out to meet them.

The girl stopped her foster brother a good hundred yards away, and rode on alone. She reined in before Nash, and he could easily see that something had happened. She looked, he thought, as though she'd been through a rock crusher.

"How did you know I was here,

ma'am?" he asked cautiously.

She told him with a bitter smile: "Red Hensley met you on the creek, you'll remember. Del, my Dad was wrong, over in New Mexico, and I want to square it with you if I can. A thing like that can't be measured in money, but I can't think of any better way to measure it. I can go to town and get something like twenty thousand dollars. Will that—help?"

"Twenty thousand!" he echoed, amazed. A fortune. But the real Delaney Nash rebelled quickly. Let this girl pay Buck Kernan's debt? It wasn't right. He realized suddenly that she would pay, in any event! The thought jarred him hard. He was as good as beaten. No, he wasn't. His father had been hanged!

And then Del Nash stepped in closer to the palomino and gripped the girl's wrist.

"Don't talk loud, Sanna," he half whispered. He indicated the some thirty wide-eyed and armed men who lounged around the Underwood ranchhouse gallery. "Men who have been oppressed long sometimes put up the meanest, craziest kind of scrap and they probably hate you, anyway. Well, if you paid me twenty thousand, how much would you have left?"

"Oh, a great deal, more than I'll ever need. You see," and to save herself she couldn't keep her low voice steady, though she tried bravely, "I'm going to marry Wingo Flint, and he's worth a lot, too."

Del Nash stared. He blurted: "You couldn't love a man like Flint. You? No! Somethin' dead up the creek, Sanna, and I can guess what it is. Flint was with old Buck in Nueva Mex, and he's been with him here. He knows everything, and he can muster more men even than old Buck because he mixes with 'em, which your daddy never does. He's a killer, with everybody afraid of him. Come to think of it, Wingo Flint is the real boss of Rambler's Range, most likely!"

HE saw that all these shots struck dead center. This girl all at once seemed little and lone and friendless. She swayed dizzily in her saddle. Into this there came a voice that grated.

"Hey, Kid!" It was Hape Underwood. "Take her up quick!"

"He heard you," Nash muttered. He had to think fast now. Men who have been oppressed too long are ruthless. "We'll ride off like we're goin' to town after that money."

He hurried away, and came back astride his long-legged roan. With him rode Panamint Truby, Hape Underwood and three other little ranchers! "Me and Carden and Orton and Enders," Hape grimly told the girl, "aim to go along and make sure that nothin' happens."

"Meanin' that you don't trust me," bit out Nash, in sudden anger. "Panamint, ride ahead with Miss Sanna, and pick up Heliotrope out there as you go. I'll overtake you after I've explained to Hape."

The ranchers scowled, but said nothing. Nash was well aware of his danger. He maneuvered to get the thirty men where he could see them all, but his position was ticklish even at that. Sanna and Little Panamint finally joined Anson Hilliard a hundred yards eastward. Nash spoke, and his voice was brittle.

"I just wanted to put the senorita where she wouldn't be hurt in case you hombres keep on actin' loco. Buck Kernan or no Buck Kernan, she gets a straight deal from me, like any other woman would. And if anybody figures to do anything about it, now's the time to object."

There was dead silence. Back on the gallery, a rat-faced U Stirrup cowboy, a trouble-maker, shattered the silence. He barked:

"Sold out!"

In his hand a six-gun roared like an echo. Nash heard the lead whistle close. His own Colt leaped from its holster swiftly. Thirty to one! Heavy seconds of time ticked by, and there was a flurry of hoofbeats behind Nash. It was not thirty against four. Sanna, Truby, and

Hilliard were backing his play at the girl's sharp command. She had taken one of Panamint's big guns and held it ready!

"The coyote who shoots now," said the fighting-mad Blood Mountain Kid, "I'll sure drill clean. There's a woman present."

Again the rat-faced U Stirrup rider's six-gun roared! Almost as the bullet plucked at Del Nash's cinnamon-brown hair above one ear, his ivory-butted Colt flashed and bellowed, and there was the thump of a rag-limp body on the gallery floor.

"Get away from here quick!" he flung at his three companions, and the four rode off together, keeping a sharp watch backward. But they were unmolested.

"I didn't think we'd get out of that," Nash said, after they had made a quarter of a mile. "You, Sanna. I don't need girls to help me fight."

Sanna Kernan ignored that. She spoke with some bitterness. "You've got all sides against you now, Del Nash. Roaring K, Flint and his killer underlings, and now the south-half people. Did it in two or three days. Fast work, surely. But it wasn't quite smart, was it?" She gave back Truby's gun.

"Maybe not," admitted Nash, also with a certain amount of bitterness. "Well, anyhow, I wouldn't take your money to buy off Kernan men and Flint men, usin' 'em to take your range from you!"

"Why, was that it?"

"It was. Exactly what they expected me to do." Suddenly Nash felt that he had to get off the subject. He had noted that the flashily-dressed foster brother was eying him in sneering hate. "Sanna, what did you bring Heliotrope with you for?"

"I didn't. He followed me." Then: "You'll take that money and get away from Rambler's Range while you can, won't you?"

"Right," drawled Truby. "Kid, you could go back to the Blood Mountain country and start a fine cow outfit with that grub-stake."

NASH frowned. It was Buck Kernan he had to settle with, not his daughter. He was still in a muddle as to just how he was going to settle with Kernan. So much had come up that he hadn't counted on!

"I reckon I'll not take your money," he told her. An odd twinkle came into his eyes. "But I likely won't leave here right off. There's the weddin', you know. Somehow, I wouldn't like to miss that."

He saw her turn white. Anson Hilliard muttered: "Weddin'?" And Nash told him: "Yeah, she's goin' to marry Flint—she says."

Hilliard seemed pleased. "Be a fine match, San. Funny I never heard about it before. Old Buck know it, San?"

"No." She was speaking with an effort. "It's a secret arrangement, Ansie. If you even hint anything to my *padre*, I'll never forgive you."

"I'll bet Kernan'd stop it," drawled Little Panamint. "Ef you ain't takin' that dinero, Kid, what're we goin' to town fer?"

"We're out of grub," Nash reminded him.

At the edge of Kernan City, Nash and Truby hung back. It wouldn't do anybody any good for them to be seen riding in with the girl and Hilliard. In front of the bank Sanna halted her palomino, dismounted and dropped rein. Hilliard did likewise. She turned into the bank, and Hilliard went toward a triumphantly smiling Wingo Flint, who had just appeared in the main doorway of his saloon.

"Congratulations, *compañero!*" said the foster brother.

Buck Kernan was at his desk, staring into vacancy when his daughter walked in. She told him: "Del Nash wouldn't take the money, *padre.*"

Old Buck sat up with a jerk. He couldn't understand. To him, money was very nearly everything. Sanna could see anger in his bearded face. Her gaze fell, and she caught her breath. On the floor at one end of her father's desk lay two big six-guns holstered to very old

belts that were filled with shining new cartridges.

"I had a hunch," he explained, "that I'm goin' to need them. I used to be handy with those guns."

Anxiety gripped her. Flint would know better, surely, than to tell. Interrupting her whirling thoughts came harsh voices from the street outside. Among them she recognized that of Hape Underwood! She hurried to the front door of the bank with her sire close behind her, and what she saw wrung a smothered cry from her lips.

Buck Kernan's sheriff—or was it Wingo Flint's?—and three of his deputies, together with half a dozen of Flint's prize gambler-gunslicks, were heading for the squat jail building across the street with Del Nash! They had an excuse now. The girl saw through it easily. The vengeful Underwood had ridden swiftly over a short-cut to town, and the sheriff had set a trap. Fighter though the Kid undoubtedly was, ten armed men of that stripe had been too many for him.

Old Buck called over his daughter's head.

"What's up, Hape?"

"That there Blood Mountain Kid," Hape Underwood shouted back, "he killed my best rider, and we aims to make a test, and see whether law here is jest for the north half of the Range!"

Sanna groaned. Of all the sheer insanity—but somebody else was talking out there. It was Wingo Flint:

"Keep your shirt on, Hape. You'll see mighty quick!" She turned to her sire.

"*Padre*, are you going to let them hang Del, too?"

As though old Buck could help himself!

COMING NEXT ISSUE

LEAD AND FLAME

An Exciting Story of Range Conflict

By A. LESLIE

AND MANY OTHER ACTION YARNS

CHAPTER IV

Roaring K Coup

THAT sheriff made a mistake. When he arrested Del Nash, he ignored the wizened and scrawny Little Panamint Truby. He laughed at the idea of the diminutive old-timer wearing two guns, and let him go. Truby led his and his partner's horses off toward the liveryman's quite as though nothing at all had happened.

Not long afterward he ambled up a rubbish-littered alley-way to a window of Kernan's office in the rear of the bank, and peered through. Old Buck was slumped in his desk chair. His daughter stood over him, talking.

"If ever there was a case of self-defense, *padre*, it was that. The Underwood man had shot at Del twice. And I don't doubt that Del saved me. Isn't there anything that can be done to save him?"

"I'm afraid not, with Flint bossin' everything." Kernan said. "How blind I've been, San! To see Delaney Nash hung like his daddy was!"

Then came the creaky voice of Little Panamint: "He ain't hung yet. They's bound to be something we can do."

Both Kernans jerked around, facing him. "Yes," the girl said, slowly, "there is something. Two possible ways out. Both terrible. Come in, Panamint, and stay here with Dad for awhile. I'll be back soon."

She hurried to the street and walked down to the main entrance of Wingo Flint's saloon. Looking over the batwing doors, she could see men lined up at the bar, drinking and laughing. Flint and Ansie Hilliard were among them. It was a sort of celebration, plainly. Then the gambler saw her, and hastened out. She led him to a shaded corner of

the weatherbeaten building.

"You have good reason to know that I love my dad, Wingo," she breathed tragically, deep-blue eyes tortured. "I love him so much that I agreed to marry you in order to save him and what he's made for me. I promised on the spur of the moment, under the strain of emotion stronger than I'd believed any human could feel. A million better women than I have made this same old, old sacrifice! It seems a little foolish to me now, Wingo. And yet, I'll still marry you if you'll do one thing for me. I don't want Del Nash hanged as his father was! Get Del to give you his word that he'll leave Rambler's Range before sundown, and then have him set free, will you?"

Flint smiled his sinister smile. "That's easy," and he went toward the squat jail building. But within five more minutes he was back. His dark countenance was a queer study. "The fool won't promise!" he told Sanna.

"I think he will," she said. "Wait here."

The so-called Blood Mountain Kid stood at an iron-barred cell window watching them, and his clear gray eyes were smiling. He saw the girl cross the dusty street alone. Soon the sheriff let her into the cell, locked the iron-latticed door and went back to his office. Nash spoke first.

"You want to know why I won't high-tail out of here like a whipped coyote, don't you? All right, here's exactly why!" And he caught her up close and kissed her, and to her amazement she did not struggle to free herself, but returned his kiss with a strange half-mad fervor while her arms crept around his neck!

"Now," he whispered, "are you goin' to marry Wingo Flint?"

"Only as the last thing I can do for you and my *padre,*" she whispered back. "Oh! There's Flint!"

The real boss of town and county had crept soundlessly up to the window on the outside. He had seen, though he hadn't heard, and seeing was more than enough. His face went black as a demon's. But even then the man kept his steely self-control.

"So that," he commented, "is it." And he went toward his saloon.

THE two in the cell faced each other again. Del Nash had not lost his smile, but it was grim now. He breathed: "Find Little Panamint and tell him to sneak a gun-belt through that window to me tonight if he can do it. If that won't work, tell him to turn my roan loose, saddled and ready, in the street out there two hours after midnight. He can watch and see what happens. Better go now, Sanna. *Adios, mi amada!*"

She thrilled at the Spanish words—*Good-by, my beloved.* Again he held her close and kissed her. All else, even his hanged father, was forgotten in this moment. She called to the sheriff to come and let her out. The desperate situation notwithstanding, Sanna Kernan walked on air with her brown-gold head in the clouds.

Old Buck was shrewd enough to guess something of the situation when she confronted him across his desk. He wasn't greatly displeased. Almost before she had begun to talk, with Truby listening eagerly, Kernan reached for his pair of old six-guns. She took them from him.

"You're not tying in with Flint, *padre;* it's exactly what he wants!"

Kernan realized that. Sanna put one belt over her right shoulder, the other over her left, indicated the open door to the nearby brick vault and hastened on in low tone:

"Your money, Dad, mostly, and you'd better get it. Things are ready to pop, and anything can happen. Put it inside Panamint's shirt. Nobody'll notice him, but if you went out of here with your shirt bulging you'd be stopped! Panamint, ride toward the Roaring K with this money, not too fast, and we'll catch up with you. Then you can come back to town."

She delivered Nash's instructions. Shortly afterward, Truby left by way of

a rear window, shirt bulging, and ambled toward the liveryman's. Kernan closed and locked the vault door. He and Sanna went into the bank proper, and for a few minutes exchanged small talk with teller and bookkeeper. When Little Panamint had had time enough to get out of town, the Kernans went to the street, old Buck with his coat on his arm.

Too many silent, slit-eyed men were on the warped board sidewalks for the time of day. Yes, things were ready to pop. Sanna with two big guns attracted attention at once, and gave her father the opportunity—just as she had reasoned—to drive away in his buckboard unmolested. Wingo Flint and Anson Hilliard were among those who laughed openly at the girl.

"Two-gun gal, eh?" called Flint. "What's the idea?"

"Taking them home," she said. "No objection, is there?"

Flint shrugged. "We'll have the Kid's trial tomorrow. You'll come in for it, of course?"

"A fine trial that will be," she told him hotly, and swung up to her saddle and rode away homeward.

The Kernans overtook Little Panamint Truby two miles north of town and relieved him of the bank cash. Truby headed his lean horse back toward Kernan City. The girl rode beside the buckboard and talked with her sire, discussing a plan that represented their last hope. He began to feel sure that it would work. She was doubtful. She urged him to put more money into it. He shook his head.

"That'd make the crew think we're afraid of them," he muttered. Conversation lagged. Kernan rekindled it with this: "Say, Nash wanted his horse turned loose in the street two hours after midnight. Why, San?"

"Nobody much would be around to see. Maybe he meant to whistle the roan to his cell window, take the rope from his saddle and use the horse to pull window-bars out. Escape, you know."

When they reached the big Roaring K ranchhouse, Long Jim Dawson was on hand to take charge of the bays and the palomino. The girl stopped him. "We'll do this, Jim. You ride the range fast and tell the foreman and the boys to get here in a hurry. Half of them are Flint men, I guess, but curiosity ought to bring even those."

KERNAN confirmed the order. Dawson ran for his horse.

After the bays and the pony had been turned into corrals, Sanna and her father went to the house. They hid the bank cash securely. Old Faquita served them something to eat. Hours dragged by, and the sun went down. Kernan now had on his two guns. Encircling Sanna's slim waist there was a belt of cartridges to fit a Winchester rifle that her Texas uncle had given her, and which she knew how to use.

Darkness fell. Lights showed in the big living room and dining room. Most of the range crew had come in. But Kernan wished to talk to them all at the same time. The late comers had supper before they reported with the rest, showing their independence, a bad sign.

At last all were gathered in the lighted living room, crowding it. Some did not remove their hats, and among these was the big and burly range boss, Jep Hensley, brother to the crippled Red. Every mother's son of that rawhide-tough aggregation had brought his gun along. Sanna hoped desperately that even a dozen were Kernan men. Swiftly she counted those whom she knew would stick. Only seven, which included Long Jim Dawson!

The giant cattleman stood with his daughter in the archway between the rooms. His spade-bearded face was very solemn and hard.

"Men," he began, "this business of havin' our own law here has hit a snag. The snag is Wingo Flint. If this crew will fight with me, we'll run Flint and his crowd off and get back to where we used to be. Maybe I don't pay you boys enough? I'm offerin' you each a bonus

of a hundred dollars, to be paid right now, and a wage raise of fifteen percent. What do you say?"

All eyes turned to Foreman Hensley —to whom Flint shortly before had sent a message. Hensley laughed a crooked, mocking laugh. "No, Buck. You've shot your wad. Even Heliotrope is against you. You don't own anything here any more. Boys, we're high-tailin' for town now. *Vamos!*"

He stood near the open front doorway. As he beckoned sweepingly to the rest of the Roaring K crew and turned to go, the barrel of an ivory-butted Colt jumped up to a line with his heart. On the threshold stood Del Nash!

"Not so fast, hombre. Buck Kernan owns a heap here. Look around a little."

At an open window in either end of the big living room had appeared a coppery-skinned man with a pair of leveled six-guns—Long Jim Dawson and Little Panamint Truby. Kernan's two Colts, also, were ready and menacing, as was Sanna's rifle. Covered neatly from four points, the crew stood as though turned to stone. Old Buck snapped out the names of the six whom he knew he could trust, and ordered them to collect hardware. The others were disarmed almost before they realized what had happened.

"Now sit down on the floor," clipped the Blood Mountain Kid. Nobody moved. He knocked the burly foreman down with the barrel of his gun. The rest obeyed then, and he hurried on: "Buck, put a man who can shoot fast and straight at that door and one at this door, and order 'em to drill any jigger who even moves a hand. There's not time for tyin' up all this bunch!"

Kernan did it. He and Sanna, Nash and Truby, and five of the seven faithful Roaring K men gathered in the early starlight outside. Del Nash gave voice to thoughts identical with the girl's.

"You've got to take care of Flint quick now, Buck, before he learns about this and rounds up the little ranchers and his town gundogs to wipe you off the face of the earth. Jail him and his sheriff and deputies the first thing. Without them the gun dogs can be run clean across the Border."

"How'll I do that," Kernan flared, "with a handful of men?"

"Have to figure it out. No time to lose, Buck. Let's go!"

Those of the nine who didn't have mounts ready, hastened to get them. Sanna saddled her palomino, and swung into the saddle, still gripping her rifle. Both her sire and Del Nash objected to her going, and she reminded them of the danger here in the event the necessarily slim guard was overcome. They gave in, telling her she'd have to stop at the edge of town. As the nine galloped off southward in the pale star radiance, the girl asked Nash how he had managed to break jail.

"Panamint slipped a gun to me through the cell window," he explained. "When a deputy brought a moldy biscuit and a cup of stained-water coffee for my supper, I made him let me out. Everybody else was at supper and it was easy. I tied and gagged him, took his gun-belt and locked him in that same cell. Got my own gun from the sheriff's office, so I'm packin' two now after givin' Panamint's back."

A great new fear gripped Sanna. "Suppose Flint has sent men to the Roaring K to look for you when they found out you were gone! That would spoil everything, wouldn't it?"

"That's a chance we've got to take," said Del Nash.

NEXT ISSUE'S NOVEL

GUN BOSS OF RAWHIDE VALLEY

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

CHAPTER V

Cyclone Guns

WINGO FLINT sat at his desk in the saloon back room. He was chewing a cold cigar savagely. Before him stood three men with bandannas knotted loosely about their necks, bandannas that they had just pulled down from their faces. One of the three was Anson Hilliard, the ingrate and traitor. Hilliard spoke.

"We carried out your orders, Wingo. Took the teller to the bank and made him open the vault. We left the teller hogtied and gagged, like you said. But there wasn't any money, not to amount to anything. Old Buck has beat you to it, Wingo!"

Flint cursed savagely, and snarled: "We'll beat him everywhere else! Changed my mind about the sheriff and deputies goin' to Kernan's after Nash. I've sent Jep Hensley word to come in with his men—ought to be here now—and I'll let them look after the Kid. They'll do it right."

"You givin' up the idea of marryin' San?" muttered Hilliard.

Flint's voice was still snarling: "Listen, Heliotrope! You should have seen Buck Kernan's face after he'd guessed about her promisin' me. I'm tellin' you, he'd rather see her dead. And now that she's fell for Blood Mountain Kid, she'll kill herself sooner than marry me. So all I can do is take what they've got, wipin' 'em out first. You look a little shaky, Heliotrope. Not the man your daddy was. Go get a drink."

Hilliard stepped into the saloon. It was well populated with hawk-faced, slit-eyed men, well armed, ready and waiting.

In the bank, the teller struggled with his bonds. Then a flicker of light near the floor caught his attention, and he guessed its origin at once. One of the many matches ignited by the masked men and thrown carelessly aside had smouldered in waste paper, and now the paper was blossoming into flame! The building was old and tinder-dry. The back door stood open. The teller ceased struggling and began to roll toward the alley while there was yet time. He made it.

The little cavalcade from the Roaring K had halted at the roadside, just out of town. Old Buck had dismounted and crept on foot to the homes of his best friends in Kernan City. Only six of them were willing to fight with him, so slender was the chance of winning out, with grim death the alternative. On his return with the six, Del Nash greeted him with this:

"I sneaked into town while you was gone, Buck. Everybody knows that something's in the wind, and there's almost nobody on the streets. Flint and his gun dogs are in his saloon. If we can manage to get the drop on 'em like we did your crew—"

He broke off at a swift rattle of hoofs out northward on the road. Kernan stopped the rider. It was one of the two men they'd left as guard at the ranch-house, and his face was a bloody mask!

"They thought they'd cashed me in," the rider panted, "but they hadn't. I got away. Jep had a hideout gun. Killed Sam. But I downed Jep. Ain't dead, and they was workin' over him when I left. And when he comes to, they'll all be in here like a roarin' cyclone!"

Buck Kernan swore a great oath. Del Nash said: "There's fourteen of us now. We've got to stamp out the Flint sidewinders before Jep Hensley and his gang—say, where's Sanna?"

Sanna and her pony had vanished in the night! Then Nash pointed toward the business section. "Look! *Fire!*"

Each with the girl's safety uppermost in his mind, they left the horses with the wounded puncher and ran toward the growing blaze.

Fortunately, the old wooden building stood to itself and there was no wind. In the street before it now stood Wingo Flint and Anson Hilliard, the sheriff and deputies, and Flint's gunslicks. Kernan and those with him could have cut down half the enemy by shooting into their backs. But this was not Kernan's way. His men were deployed thinly. Nash passed the whispered word along: "When you shoot, drop quick, shoot again, and take cover before the smoke clears."

Old Buck's great voice boomed above the angry crackle of the mounting flames: "Hands up, you rattlesnakes—get 'em up fast!"

Flint's men jerked around in surprise, but recovered instantly. Their hands streaked for shooting hardware. Twenty-nine against fourteen, most of the twenty-nine gun artists and most of the attackers only average shots! The very earth seemed to rock at the explosion of so much gunpowder in the same tiny second of time. But with the exception of a few wounds Kernan's party had saved itself by dropping under the enemy lead. The fourteen fired again, quickly, through the whirling pall of smoke, then rose and sprang for cover here and there along the firelit street.

WHEN the smoke lifted, Buck and Nash were behind the corner of the same building. Between them and the fire lay three prostrate figures. The others of Flint's men had gone with Flint to cover. Everybody was sniping, chiefly at gun-flashes. Kernan was in a frenzy, and so was Del Nash. Sanna had known they wouldn't let her go, or she'd have told them where— The moment the bad four-fifths of the Roaring K range crew came roaring into town, it would be the end, and there was nothing to do but snipe, snipe—

"Give 'em plenty!" creaked Little Panamint Truby from behind a post.

Bra-a-ang! Bra-a-ang! bellowed the six-guns. *Bra-a-ang! Bra-a-ang!*

Kernan's bearded face was bleeding around wood splinters that bullets had driven into it. Whizzing lead had gashed Nash's right shoulder and right temple, but the young fighter had not slowed down. Old Buck found himself thinking sorowfully back to fighting old Friel Nash.

"Looks like we're gone," he told young Nash sadly. Then: "For gosh sakes, what's that?"

It was a burst of strange gunfire over beyond the enemy. All at once Flint men were backing into the street, exposing themselves recklessly. *Bra-a-ang!*—roared the Kernan guns in a death-song concert. "Give 'em hot lead!" shouted Little Panamint and Long Jim Dawson in one breath. "There goes Wingo Flint!"

The Kid's right-hand gun bucked once more, and Flint lay dead in the dust with Anson Hilliard and many others. The battle was over. Del Nash wiped blood from his eyes and gasped at that which his eyes beheld. Sanna Kernan had come with the little ranchers and their boys—they had a leader now! But his triumph was quickly interrupted. Jep Hensley, a red rag about his head, came riding at a breakneck pace with his men!

"Look there!" Nash yelled. "Quick, every mother's son of you, out of the way, Sanna! For the love of heaven—*shoot!*"

That electrified them. A volley of more than forty bullets went whistling into the newcomers. Another followed, and another. There were curses, groans, empty saddles, horses rearing and screaming-pandemonium on the fire-red scene, if ever there was pandemonium—and then a horrible silence save for the angry sucking noise of the fire. Silence that was broken by the racking sob of a woman. Del Nash's cry was thick:

"Sanna!"

Her much-loved little palomino had been shot from under her. She sat beside it in the red dust, her Winchester rifle in the dust at her knee.

Its barrel was hot. She looked up to

see Del Nash bending over her. He carried her to her father, who stood as though paralyzed in the shadow between two buildings. But the girl was not even wounded, and Nash put her on her feet. Kernan got himself in hand. He wanted to know: "How'd you ever manage to get the south-halfers on our side so quick, San?"

BRAVELY she stiffened herself. "I promised to give them back the range and the cattle they'd lost to you. I convinced them as to just what Flint was! I'd started for Hape Underwood's, and I met them all riding for town to see what the fire was. You'll have to make my promise good, *padre!*"

"You bet I will!" replied her sire, a new Buck Kernan on a new Rambler's Range. He noted that the street was filled with milling people, and hurried to look for Hape Underwood, to shake his hand and call him friend. Nash led Sanna out of that grim atmosphere of blood and death.

When they stopped in shadows on the next street, the girl caught his arm tremulously and turned her white face upward. "You came here," she breathed, "to—collect. Instead, you helped us; we'd have perished without you. My father wronged yours, Del, I know. But he wasn't himself after Mother passed—he'd loved her so much! Since it was love, which can be terrible as well as fine, I hope you can forgive him."

Sanna could get no farther with it. Not until the Blood Mountain Kid, so-called, had said:

"I think I already have, honey. I didn't know what it was to love somebody like that, but now I do, and there's no more hate in me."

"Then t-take me in your arms and kiss me," he heard her sobbing, but happy, whisper, "just like you did there in the jail when we first knew."

TRAIL CAMP

(Continued from page 9)

are going in for the girl events and in some places they are staging all girl rodeos. The organization has a complete publicity department with James J. Cathey in charge.

The G. R. A. also has its own point award system, with championship titles awarded at the close of each season, and plenty of donors giving valuable trophies and merchandise to the title winners.

The latest compilation of points for this season so far shows Jackie Worthington, of Jacksboro, Texas, leading for the title of champion all-around cowgirl, and Margaret Montgomery, Ozona, Texas, in second place. In bareback bronc riding, Jackie Worthington is also the leader, with Thena Mae Farr, of Seymour, Texas, in second place.

Margaret Montgomery leads for the calf roping title, and Patty Radke Hughes, of Tulsa, Okla. is second. In ribbon racing, Margaret Montgomery is the leader with Wanda Harper, of Grit, Texas, in second place. Jackie Worthington is the leader in bull riding, with Frances Weeg, of Big Spring, second. LaTonne Sewalt, of Brownwood, Texas, is the leader in sponsor events, with Fannie Mae Cox, of Spicewood, Texas, in second place.

The events listed as sponsor events are mostly barrel races, and LaTonne Sewalt is the 11-year-old daughter of the champion calf roper and steer wrestler, Royce Sewalt. She is about the most sensational juvenile rider seen in any rodeo arena in many a day. The way she rode her quarter horse in the fast quick turns around the barrels to beat 25 other and older contestants at the Houston, Texas, Fat Stock Show Rodeo, last February, made the event a very thrilling one.

Texas Girl Rodeo

Forty entries from New Mexico, Wyoming, California, Oklahoma and Texas entered the three day All Girls Rodeo, at Belton, Texas, and rode, roped and spurred their way into the hearts of the great crowds who attended. They finished the three days without any serious injuries, although there were plenty of sore spots and bruises.

The final results in bareback bronc riding were: 1st, Jackie Worthington; 2nd, Rea

Beach; 3rd, Marie Morris; 4th, Margaret Montgomery.

Jackie Worthington also won the bull riding, Frances Weeg was second, Rae Beach was third and Sue Burt fourth. Mary Black won the barrel race, Jackie Worthington was second, Sally Taylor was third and Dixie Toalson fourth. Margaret Montgomery won the calf roping, Patty Hughes was second, Nancy Binford was third and Judy Hays was fourth.

The Northwest Shrine Second Annual Rodeo at Portland, Oregon, was a great show and attracted nearly 150 of the top hands of the entire country. The purses totaled approximately $25,000. Len Fuller was general chairman, William G. Pyle was general manager, Margaret Ohler secretary, and Smokey Stearns rodeo chairman.

The final winners, with the amount of prize money allotted to each in the final win, were as follows: Bareback bronc riding: 1st, Bill Linderman, $443.35—2nd, Jimmy Sloan, $332.50—3rd, Wallace Brooks, $221.66—4th, Buster Ivory, $110.83.

Saddle bronc riding: 1st, Casey Tibbs, $400.00—2nd, Bill Linderman, $300.00—3rd, and 4th, split between Larry Finley and Buster Ivory, each $150.00.

Calf roping: 1st, Marion Getzweller, $600.00—2nd, Claude Henson, $450.00—3rd, Vern Castro, $300.00—4th, Homer Pettigrew, $150.00.

Bull riding: 1st, Harry Tompkins, $420.00—2nd, Lloyd Lippi, $315.00—3rd, Bob Maynard, $210.00—4th, Joel Sublett, $105.00.

Steer wrestling: 1st, Bill Linderman, $456.00—2nd, Jim Hailey, $342.00—3rd, Lex Connelly, $228.00—4th, Buck Sorrells, $114.00.

Bill Linderman won the all around championship of the show by winning more points and purse money than any other contestant. His total winnings were $2,136.17.

Well, cowhands, that's about all the news and gossip that we have time to give out this time, but drop around our trail camp again, you're always welcome. *Adios.*

—FOGHORN CLANCY.

IN OUR NEXT ISSUE

JOE KNIGHT, owner of the J K Connected ranch and head of the Knifegash Cattle syndicate, was the biggest rancher in the state—and he wanted to be bigger. He wanted Knifegash, which was to all intents and purposes his own outfit, to control the entire Rawhide Valley. In fact this ambition burned so fiercely within him that he could not rest until it was fulfilled, and no act was too ruthless, no deed too inhuman to stop him from his aim of unlimited expansion. He would snuff out the life of a man who threatened to slow up his progress even briefly with as little compunction as a bull would gore a gopher in the grass.

Some men are like that. They are the tyrants who scourge the earth in retaliation for their own basic weakness, while better men stand by in disbelief that such unfeeling cruelty can exist or such suffering be inflicted by man upon man. And frequently they stand by until it is too late and the damage done by a person who in himself is of the utmost insignificance, piles as high as if the havoc had been the creation of a gigantic if black-hearted genius.

Today such men are often recognizable. They are clearly marked by their insatiable drive for power far beyond their needs. In the day of Joe Knight, however, unbridled ambition was not understood, and a man could often disguise it under cover of such labels as progress or patriotism to bamboozle the majority of the population within the range of his operations.

But even in those days there were men who could see through the facade of trumpery erected by such villains, and such a man was Steve Reese. That six-foot, black-eyed field chief of the Cattlemen's Protective Association, was seldom unaware of a man's true caliber after the first long look into his eyes. And a man like Joe Knight wouldn't fool him any longer than a jug-headed bronc.

Steve, and his two assistants, the rugged young giant with the fiery red hair and twinkling blue eyes, Hank Ball, and the cigar-smoking humorist and gun-wizard, Dusty Trail, had boarded the Colorado and Rio Grande and were riding the puffing train into the high mountains for a fishing trip, when they got a glimpse from the car window of what looked like the cold-blooded bushwhacking of a girl and an old man. They hopped off the train at the next siding, grabbed the irons of an express going the other way, and tumbled off into a mess of cow-country trouble that would have meant anyone else hiking for the far, high and lonesome as fast as a bronc could scatter gravel.

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The trail of the bushwhacker led down some dizzy switchbacks into the town of Summit Rock, Colorado, a tough settlement where saloons, gambling dives, deadfalls and honkytonks outnumbered legitimate business ten to one, and whose plank sidewalks teemed with tough buckaroos.

Riding a borrowed horse, Reese preceded his sidekicks into this sink of six-gun law and settled down on the porch of the Index Bar with his eyes open to pick up a clue that might lead back to the ambush in the hills. Presently a bleary-eyed barfly beside him leaned toward him and whispered:

"Want to see a jigger who ain't got long to live?"

Reese's eyebrows lifted. "Who?" he asked.

"That young feller yonder in the blue army shirt—name of Cliff Copeland."

"Looks healthy enough," Reese said, needling his informant.

"Copeland owns the Twin C outfit, 'tother end of Rawhide Valley. President of the small cowman's association. He's tryin' to buck Joe Knight's combine—which ain't healthy, no siree."

"This Joe Knight hombre makes a pretty big splash hereabouts, eh?" Reese asked. "Sort of figures he's bull of the herd?"

"Knight?' the man replied. "Biggest cowman in Colorado. When Knight says frog everybody hops, from Sheriff McCleemont on down to yours truly. Matter of fact that's him comin', now."

Reese twisted around to eye the towering figure of the man who had just left the Index barroom.

Knight had the commanding figure and the authoritative mien to go with the ownership of the Knifegash Cattle Company. His massive torso was covered in an expensive fustian town coat; his Stetson was a sixty dollar model, and his tailored California pants, foxed with untanned buckskin, were neatly tucked into shopmade kangaroo leather star boots.

Reese had his close view of the wealthy land baron as Joe Knight paused to light up an expensive Carolina perfecto. The man's head was covered with close-cropped sorrel hair; his skin was ruddy with health, and women no doubt considered him handsome. But if Knight's agate brown eyes were the windows of his soul, Steve Reese knew this man was as shrewd as he was predatory; a man of warped moral fibre, mad with ambition and doubly dangerous because he had

the money to back his greed with force.

Tugging on a pair of beaded buckskin gauntlets, the Knifegash boss shifted his shoulders in an arrogant gesture which seemed to exude self-confidence, and walked over to the hitch-rack to loosen his pony's reins. He mounted and backed the horse into the street. As he was reining around a voice shouted from across the street.

"Just a second, Knight. I want to see you a minute."

Like a rock cast into a placid pool, the effect of that voice with its vague challenge spread up and down Summit Rock's street and filled this day with a sudden electric suspense. For the speaker was Cliff Copeland, president of the small rancher's association in Rawhide Valley.

That voice started an ever widening circle of waves that engulfed the whole valley in blood-drenched warfare that could be stopped only by a man of the caliber of Steve Reese.

And following his understanding that duty is where you find it, the able Cattle Association Field Chief plunged with his two doughty lieutenants into the battle on the side of those good but unwary men who had waited too long while a would-be dictator of the rangeland got his hooks into their holdings.

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LETTERS FROM READERS

CORRESPONDENCE concerning Luther Locke's recent true stories about characters and incidents of the real West continues unabated. What were the exactly correct details of many incidents that have been handed down till they have become legends and have been elaborated or changed many times in the telling is often a very

[*Turn page*]

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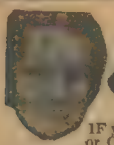

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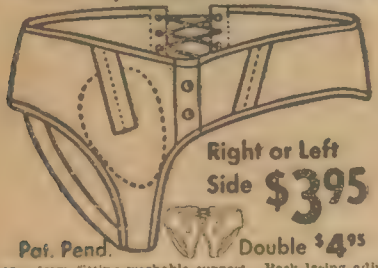

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controversial matter. I hardly know of any article of Western history being published in a magazine without someone writing in and disputing the validity of some of its parts. Anyway controversy is what keeps us on our toes. For instance:

I am a faithful reader of your magazine and at the same time a Western historian. I devote most of my research to one special subject—Tombstone, Arizona. On the following pages I have written an account of the shooting of Marshal White, something about the shooting of "Bitter Creek" in your last issue, something on John Slaughter and a little on several other subjects.

I would like to suggest that you run an article on Burt Alvord soon in your magazine, as I think he should rank along with other Tombstone lawmen—though he later became a train robber of some fame.

As for Luther Locke's stories on John Slaughter, some of them were pretty true—others, anyone who knew the history of old Tombstone would call worthless.

In your May, 1950 issue you had a letter from G. G. Krause stating that Marshal White was killed October 27, 1880. I believe he was killed on the morning of Nov. 6, 1880. Curly Bill and a bunch of wild cowboys were amusing themselves by shooting up Tombstone. Marshal Fred White drew his six-shooter and ran out of his office onto the street. The first man he saw was Virgil Earp. He yelled for him to come along and help him quiet them down.

A large part of the amusement of these cowboys was the sight of the Marshal panting out to stop their shooting. They scattered yelling. Curly Bill ran down an alley, but halted at the command of White and Earp and turned to face them.

White snapped, "Give me that six-shooter. Hand it over butt first." Curly Bill grinned, extending the pistol. White, reaching for it, lowered his own. The .45 in Bill's hand whirled, the butt slapping into his palm. The gun fired even as Virgil Earp was snatching at Curly. White gasped, dropped his gun and sank dying to the ground. Virgil Earp gaped down at the dying man. He did his best to help him and then lifted his eyes to Curly Bill.

Fred White dying in the alley was the first recorded victim of the "road agents" or "Curly Bill" spin.

Curly Bill surrendered and gave his .45 to Virgil Earp. He claimed that as he was handing his gun over to White Earp seized him from behind, and his .45, having a hair trigger, was accidentally fired. That part of it about the hair-trigger has the odor of a dead fish.

A man who was neither a Clanton nor on the White-Earp side was "Hard Rock" Urch. He said, "That was just a stall, that tale. Curly Bill said his gun was awful light-triggered.

What difference did that make—unless he was handing Fred White a cocked pistol, with the muzzle pointing at Fred's dinner? And do you think White was that short a shorthorn? That he'd disarm a man with Curly Bill's "rep" that way? *Munca! Jamas!* It was the road agent's spin that killed White.

As for the shooting of "Bitter Creek" Gallagher by John Slaughter—Slaughter I always thought killed Gallagher on the plains outside Fort Sumner in a gun duel in 1886, Slaughter putting four slugs in Gallagher with his rifle, while the latter's shots missed.

As for Slaughter shooting Curly Bill Brocius, I don't see whether or how Mr. Locke has any grounds at all for this claim. I don't think Earp got him at Iron Springs in 1882 or Slaughter at all later on. As far as I know he could be alive today. Some say he is down in Mexico.

Nor did Slaughter kill Ed Lyle, Captain Stillwell or the Soto brothers—only one that I know of—he ran them out of the country. I had heard that John Slaughter wore a big Stetson and a single ivory Colt's .45 while Sheriff.——*Robert M. Welch, Lincoln, Illinois.*

Thanks Mr. Welch. That's a lot of material to cogitate. Sorry we haven't room for author Luther Locke's answer, but will try to get it in shortly.

And here's a response to our request for items for our Western superstitions debunking department.

Was interested in your recent letters explaining away some of the errors authors are always making in stories of the West. I know something about snakes, having made a specialty of them most of my life. Have even made side money hunting them and selling them for snake oil and fancy snake-skins. Have had a lot of strange questions asked me about snakes. Here are some.

Will a King snake kill a rattler? Yes, he'll grab him back of the head so he can't strike, wrap around him and hang on till he's dead. A fight between a King snake and a rattler is something to watch.

Will a rattler go over a hair rope, or were the cowboys really safe when they put a hair rope around their beds? The answer to this one is about half and half. A rattler certainly will go over a hair rope if he wants to, but he'll probably go around it if he has nothing to go across for.

Do rattlers crawl in bed with cowboys sleeping on the range? Not often, but it's been known to happen. They are probably hunting a warm place on a cold night.

Do rattlesnakes sing in the spring? They sure do. In mating season they make a long drawn noise in their underground homes when the sun warmth is just beginning to penetrate. It is a high humming sound that could very well be described as singing.—*J. W. Dowling, Fresno, Calif.*

Interesting information, Mr. Dowling. We have wondered about those things ourselves.

[*Turn page*]

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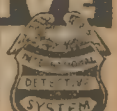

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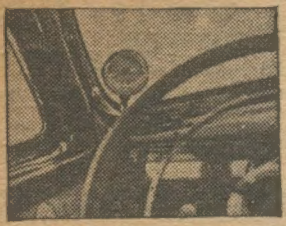

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Just a note to let you know how much I like UTE BASIN RAIDERS by D. B. Newton. Steve Reese sure outdid himself in out-thinking and outfighting the water hogs in that one. I think your recent issues were extra good all the way through. RANGE RIDERS WESTERN sometime gets better and never fails to meet its standard. As long as it stays the way it is I'll be a Steve Reese fan. I also thought VALLEY OF THE HUNTED, by Donald Bayne Hobart, was outstanding. It had a lot of good humor besides all the fighting. Wish you continued success.—*June Albright, Augusta, Maine.*

Thanks, June, and with the deepest appreciation to all who have written us, we'll say good-by till next issue, when we hope to find room for many more of your missives. In the meanwhile, we hope lots more of you will drop us a line with suggestions, criticisms or accounts of your own Western experiences. A postcard will do if you haven't time for a letter, and please address all mail to RANGE RIDERS WESTERN, 10 E. 40th St. New York 16, N. Y. Thank you, everybody!

—THE EDITOR.

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946, of Range Riders Western, published bi-monthly at New York, N. Y., for October 1, 1949. State of New York, County of New York, ss. Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared H. L. Herbert, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of Range Riders Western, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 (section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations), printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business manager are: Publisher, Better Publications of Canada, Ltd., 36 Toronto St., Toronto, Can.; Editor, G. B. Farnum, 36 Toronto St., Toronto, Can.; Managing Editor, None; Business Manager, H. L. Herbert, 36 Toronto St., Toronto, Can. 2. That the owners are: Better Publications of Canada, Ltd., 36 Toronto St., Toronto, Can.; N. L. Pines, 36 Toronto St., Toronto, Can.; H. L. Herbert, 36 Toronto St., Toronto, Can. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. H. L. Herbert, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 1st day of October, 1949. Eugene Wechsler, Notary Public. My commission expires March 30, 1950.

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Your next step is a good job installing and servicing Radio-Television sets or becoming boss of your own Radio-Television sales and service shop or getting a good job in a Broadcasting Station. Today there are over 81,000,000 home and auto Radios. 2700 Broadcasting Stations are on the air. Aviation and Police Radios, Micro-Wave Relay, Two-Way Radio are all expanding fields making more and better opportunities for servicing and communication technicians and FCC licensed operators.

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And think of the opportunities in Television! In 1949 almost 3,000,000 Television sets were sold. By 1954 authorities estimate 20,000,000 Television sets will be in use. 100 Television Stations are now operating, with experts predicting 1,000. Now is the time to get in line for success and a bright future in America's fast growing industry. Be a Radio-Television Technician.

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"Soon after finishing the N.R.I. course, worked for servicing shop. Now I am Chief Engineer of two-way FM Police Radio Installations."—S. W. DINWIDDIE, Jacksonville, Illinois.

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"Am authorized serviceman for 5 large manufacturers and do servicing for 7 dealers. N.R.I. has enabled me to build an enviable reputation in Television."—PAUL MILLER, Maumee, O.

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"Before finishing course, I earned as much as $10 a week in Radio servicing, at home in spare time. Recommend N.R.I. to everyone interested in Radio."—S. J. PETRUFF, Miami, Fla.

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Keep your job while training at home. Hundreds I've trained are successful RADIO-TELEVISION TECHNICIANS. Most had no previous experience; many no more than grammar school education. Learn Radio-Television principles from illustrated lessons. Get PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE—build valuable multitester for conducting tests. You practice servicing Radios or operating transmitters—experiment with circuits common to Radio and Television. You keep all equipment. Many students make $5, $10 a week extra fixing neighbors' Radios in spare time. SPECIAL BOOKLETS start teaching you the day you enroll.

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